

# SWEET FREEDOM'S PLAINS:

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African Americans on the Overland Trails  
1841-1869

By

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For the National Park Service

National Trails Intermountain Region

Salt Lake City & Santa Fe

January 31, 2012

### The Flying Slave

The night is dark, and keen the air,  
And the Slave is flying to be free;  
His parting word is one short prayer;  
O God, but give me Liberty!  
Farewell – farewell!  
Behind I leave the whips and chains,  
Before me spreads sweet Freedom's plains

--William Wells Brown  
*The Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs  
For Anti-Slavery Meetings, 1848*

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## PREFACE

This study examines African American participation in the great overland trails emigrations that occurred in the nineteenth century. It focuses on the history of African Americans on the California, Oregon and Mormon Trails from 1841 to 1869, when the transcontinental railroad was completed. The study explores three interrelated themes: black emigrants' experiences on the overland trails, their perceptions of the journey, and their perceptions of the West and their new communities. Chapter 1, "Race, Slavery, and Freedom," discusses the early presence of people of African ancestry in the West and their roles in the exploration and settlement of the region. It also provides an overview of the changing status of African Americans, the state of race relations, and the nature and scope of slavery and freedom in the United States from the colonial era through the dawn of the great overland migrations of the nineteenth century. Chapter 2, "The Jumping-Off Places," focuses on the bustling river towns where black and white pioneers outfitted themselves for the trail. It explores the cosmopolitan and commercial character of the towns, discusses entrepreneurial black residents who made livelihoods from the overland trade and facilitated black (and white) emigration, examines the economic and racial barriers that impeded black overlanders, and discusses the strategies they used to overcome these obstacles. It concludes with a discussion of the ways in which free and enslaved blacks negotiated the perilous racial terrain of the jumping-off towns where they were especially vulnerable to foul play and slave catchers. Chapter 3, "The Providential Corridor," reviews the complex of overland trails, including the main Oregon, California, and Mormon Trail routes and the less-traveled southern trails. This chapter provides an analysis of the experiences and perceptions of African Americans on the trails. It discusses their contributions to the exploration, mapping, and development of the routes, examines their participation in the

responsibilities and hardships that attended the journey, and looks at their interactions with Indians and their interactions with their white trail mates. Chapter 4, “Sweet Freedom’s Plains,” looks at the expectations black men and women had of the West. It discusses the pragmatic and intangible factors that motivated them (enslaved and free) to venture across the plains in numbers that cannot be determined precisely. To evaluate the degree to which black expectations of the West were fulfilled, the chapter concludes with a discussion of specific African American emigrants and their varied experiences. Chapter 5, “Place of Promise,” highlights the stories of a number of black pioneers who arrived in the West and began the process of community-building. This complicated task often included establishing themselves as free people first, then carving out a place in the emerging economies of the West, challenging the barriers that prevented them from achieving their goals, and sometimes, as the remarkable story of Rachel Brown in Ohio and her husband David Brown in California’s gold fields shows, making a complete break with their old lives.

It is difficult to speak of a “representative” African American Western experience because of the many unique circumstances that shaped black western emigration. The stories included in this report reveal the individuality of the black overlanders. However, their stories also show that black men and women who crossed the plains shared common experiences regardless of their status or the circumstances that set them on the western trails. What is most evident is that for the great majority of black overland emigrants, the West represented a testing ground for determining whether they and all African Americans could have a stake in the American dream.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Blake Allmendinger’s discussion of a representative black western experience and the notion of the West and the American Dream. See Blake Allmendinger, *Imagining the African American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), xvi, 15.



The nature and scope of African American participation on the trails prompt a number of questions that point to a need for a re-conceptualization of the migration narrative so that it more accurately reflects the nature, complexity, and racial diversity of the western pioneers. One of the key issues examined in this report concerns the extent of black participation in western emigration. How many African Americans went west? Estimates of the total emigration vary by hundreds of thousands. It is virtually impossible to produce a definitive figure for the total number of African Americans who made the overland journey. The research presented in this study suggests that every African American emigrant identified by name in the trails literature is representative of scores, if not hundreds, of other unidentified black emigrants. This challenges the popular assumption that the black presence in overland emigration was negligible.<sup>2</sup>

Related to the first question is that of identity: who were these African American overland travelers? While slaves made up a significant portion of black overlanders, free blacks composed a portion of the total. African Americans, enslaved and free, often held positions of authority and responsibility in wagon train companies. Sometimes financially secure, generous black emigrants covered the costs for white overlanders who were without funds to undertake the expensive journey.

Another issue in this study is the question of how black emigrants determined the end of their journey. Why did they decide to stop where they did? For African Americans, the overland journey was more open-ended than that of their white counterparts. Many African Americans experienced the overland trip as a series of sojourns along and detours from the Oregon and California Trails. Their approach to permanent Western settlement was conditioned by the racial

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of numbers of unidentified African American overlanders, see National Park Service, *Historic Resource Study: Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail*, by Stanley B. Kimball (Denver: Denver Service Center, May 1991), 6; Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 25-26; Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 83.

climate that prevailed at the locations in which they stopped. A racially hospitable location and economic opportunity were the most compelling factors in determining when African Americans had arrived at the end of the trail.

This study also examines African Americans' expectations of the overland trip. Clearly, black and white emigrants shared goals of economic advancement and prosperity, and both groups perceived the overland journey as a means to those ends. However, black expectations also were informed by a determination to leave slavery and oppression behind. This was doubly true for African American women who struggled under the dual yoke of racial and gender discrimination. Therefore, every step along the overland trails affirmed African Americans' aspirations and agency.

This study considers black emigrant perceptions of the natural environment of the trails and the West. Reflecting their unique position and aspirations in nineteenth century America, some black overlanders (often trappers, traders, and mountain men) conferred their own symbol-laden designations on geographic landmarks along the trails. Related to the issue of black perceptions of the natural environment of the trails is that of African American expectations of the West. Most African Americans, like their white counterparts, perceived the West as a pristine, natural environment that held the promise not only of freedom but of transformation. Black men and women also admired their new western home for intangible, aesthetic reasons in addition to the material benefits it offered.

Finally, the study examines the issue of how African American western emigrants fared when they reached their final destination. How did they fit into their new communities? How did they make a living? Was there a conflict between expectations and reality in the West? How did they establish themselves as free people in the West?

## Methodology

Methodologically, this work places African American emigrants, their experiences, and their self-perceptions at the center of the story of overland emigration. It attempts to understand what these overlanders valued as black people living in nineteenth century America, and what they expected of themselves and their new homes in the West. One reviewer observed a perceived imbalance in this report insofar as the majority of the stories and examples presented seem to illustrate the courage and perseverance of African American overlanders. Where, the reviewer wondered, are the stories of blacks who engaged in dishonest or shameful activities? After all, the history of overland migration abounds with tales of corrupt, treacherous, and violent whites who exploited emigrants. For example, the accounts of so-called “white Indians”—white men who disguised themselves as Indians and preyed upon emigrant wagon parties, then blended in with the white emigrants—occur throughout trails literature. Are there comparable tales about African Americans? This seeming “imbalance” is rooted in the inherent problems of doing the history of African American overlanders, not in any bias or desire to conceal the truth. Accounts about black emigrants’ activities, positive or otherwise, are scarce. Clearly, there were no “black Indians.” However, the stories (in Chapter 3) of George Berryman, the desperate slave of an unscrupulous black owner, the “runaway slave” and dubious “sheriff” who swindled a party of white emigrants in Texas, and “negro Andy” who participated in the rape of an Indian woman, show that some African Americans engaged in villainous activities on the trail. But accounts of black misdeeds are, like other stories of black overlanders, limited. Trails literature tends to disregard the activities of blacks. Most of the stories that exist are told by whites, some of whom were not exactly unbiased observers. In addition, black overlanders and their descendants would have been unlikely to write about or publically share stories of

behavior that was less than admirable. This aspect of the African American overland experience perhaps is buried deep in the family lore of generations of black pioneer families. Mindful of these challenges, this report has attempted to retrieve the stories (whether laudable or disreputable) of the black men and women who traveled the overland trails, and place them firmly within the history of western emigration and settlement.

This report is indebted to and draws deeply from earlier scholarship on African Americans in the West. I have relied on Delilah Beasley's pioneering *Negro Trail Blazers of California* for a wealth of detail about black western settlers. Beasley's book is one of the earliest works to take a professional approach to the subject, even though she was a self-taught researcher and historian. The personal stories, manumission papers, and other primary sources included in her book have been invaluable. Other early scholarship of the black western experience that has been enormously helpful for my research include Kenneth Wiggins Porter's edited volume, *The Negro on the American Frontier*, the works of W. Sherman Savage published in *The Journal of Negro History*, and the work of Sue Bailey Thurman.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 1970s, there has been a renewed interest in the West and African American western history that has produced an abundance of outstanding scholarship. This report has incorporated the pioneering works of Jack Forbes, William Loren Katz, Rudolph Lapp, James Fisher, and John W. Ravage for their rich research on the black experience in the West. Of course Quintard Taylor's groundbreaking book, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990*, has set a new standard for all scholars working in

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<sup>3</sup> Delilah Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1919); Kenneth Wiggins Porter, ed., *The Negro on the American Frontier* (New York: Arno Press and the *New York Times*, 1971); W. Sherman Savage, "The Negro in the Westward Movement," *Journal of Negro History* 24, no. 4 (October 1940): 531-539, and "The Negro in the History of the Pacific Northwest," *Journal of Negro History* 13, no. 3 (July 1928): 255-264; and Sue Bailey Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California* (1949; repr., San Francisco: A and E Research Associates, 1971).

the field of African American western history. In addition, the works of John D. Unruh, Jr., Merrill J. Mattes, Dale L. Morgan, and William H. Leckie are touchstones in the field of western and overland trails scholarship. Richard V. Francaviglia's remarkable book, *Mapping and Imagination in the Great Basin: A Cartographic History*, has added a new dimension to our understanding of the landscape and the geography of the American West.<sup>4</sup> This work also incorporates diaries, journals, census records, maps, government documents, and other primary and secondary sources to tease the stories of African American emigrants from the general narrative of overland migration.

My effort to hear the voices of black emigrants has been an exhilarating and sometimes frustrating task. Contemporary white diarists and commentators (the most prolific chroniclers of the overland emigrations) tended to be racially condescending or dismissive of the African American presence. These sources can be tremendously useful but not necessarily representative of the realities of African Americans' contributions to the overland emigration story. Because of the paucity of specific information on black overland emigrants, most of the words and descriptions of African Americans, by necessity, have come from white diarists and observers. Nevertheless, these sources, no matter how casual or disdainful the observation, indicate that

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Forbes, *African Americans in the Far West: A Handbook for Educators* (Berkeley: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1970); William Loren Katz, *The Black West: A Pictorial History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, 1987); Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*; James Fisher, "A History of the Political and Social Development of the Black Community in California, 1850-1950" (PhD diss., State University of New York, Stony Brook, 1971); John W. Ravage, *Black Pioneers: Images of the Black Experiences on the North American Frontier* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1997); Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*; see also Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives: A Descriptive Bibliography of Travel Over the Great Central Overland Route to Oregon, California, Utah, Colorado, Montana and Other Western States and Territories, 1812-1866* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Dale L. Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846: Diaries and Letters of the California-Oregon Trail*, vols. 1 and 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963); William H. Leckie and Shirley A. Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Black Cavalry in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); Richard V. Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination in the Great Basin: A Cartographic History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005).

African Americans were a key aspect of the overland migration. What emerges from the brief references to blacks in white accounts is a picture of black agency, capability, and purpose that most white contemporaries could not or would not acknowledge.

I have also drawn on oral histories, interviews, and reminiscences of black emigrants and their descendants for this report. I personally conducted interviews with emigrant descendants whom I identified during the course of my research. While oral history can pose problems for historical accuracy (e.g., memory dims with the passage of time, second-hand accounts can be unreliable, or the interviewee can have a selective memory), it is an invaluable tool for illuminating the personal, for gaining alternate perspectives, and for allowing the marginalized to enter the mainstream. Because many (if not most) black overlanders were illiterate, their only option was to transmit their stories and experiences orally. Their stories have been preserved and carried down through time as family lore. I have included oral histories in this study, fully aware of their inherent problems but convinced of their importance in gaining insight into what African American emigrants believed about themselves, unfiltered through the perceptions of whites. The descendants of African American pioneers, though removed in time from the actual events, are the living repositories of the experiences of black emigrants. My objective in using oral histories and recollections is, as nearly as possible, to let the black overlanders speak for themselves. In this way we can learn what they valued enough to preserve and pass along to succeeding generations.

## Style and Format

In quoting from primary source documents I have chosen to retain the peculiarities of nineteenth-century spelling, grammar and word usage. Some documents contain words, phrases, and racial epithets that may be offensive to modern readers. In each case, the words or phrases are in quotation marks or block quotes; I have kept the original text and have not changed the wording. The citations used in this study (footnotes and bibliography) follow the Chicago style as outlined in the manual by Kate L. Turabian.<sup>5</sup> The footnotes are done in the “complex notes” format shown in the Turabian manual. That is, to avoid cluttering the text with reference numbers when several sources are cited to make a single point, the cited sources are grouped into a single footnote. The citations in the footnote are listed in the same order that the references appear in the text. The listed citations in the footnote are separated by semicolons.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For more on complex notes, see *Ibid.*, 153.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to a host of researchers, scholars, archivists, librarians, curators, public historians, preservationists, and private individuals who shared their time and expertise with me. Their insight and knowledge have enriched my understanding and appreciation of African American and western history. Many thanks to:

Lee Kreutzer, Cultural Resource Specialist, National Trails Intermountain Region National Park Service, Salt Lake City; Frank Norris, Historian, National Park Service, Santa Fe; Aaron Mahr, Superintendent, National Trails Intermountain Region, National Park Service, Salt Lake City; Susan Ferentinos, former Public History Manager, Organization of American Historians, Bloomington, Indiana; Aidan Smith, Interim Public History Manager, Organization of American Historians; Guy Washington, Regional Manager, National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program of the National Park Service; John Mark Lambertson, Director and Archivist of the National Frontier Trails Museum, Independence, Missouri; Michael N. Landon, Archivist, Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; Will Bagley, independent historian, Salt Lake City; Robert A. Clark, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma; Gary Kurutz, Director of Special Collections, California State Library, Sacramento; Kevin Starr, Director, California State Library (emeritus), Sacramento; Andrew St. Mary, California State Library (emeritus); Michael J. Schmandt, Department of Geography, California State University, Sacramento; Kenneth Owens, Department of History (emeritus), California State University, Sacramento; Erika Gasser, Department of History, California State University, Sacramento; Sheila O'Neill, Director, Special Collections, University Archives, California State University, Sacramento; Jack Smith, Inter-library Loan, California State University, Sacramento; Ben Amata, Library, California State University, Sacramento; Patricia Johnson, Archivist,



Center for Sacramento History; Quintard Taylor, Department of History, University of Washington, Seattle; Rick Moss, Director, African American Museum and Library, Oakland, California; Elizabeth Goldstein, President, California State Parks Foundation; Ruth Coleman, Director, California State Parks; Clarence Caesar, Project Officer, California State Parks; Ronald G. Coleman, Department of History and Ethnic Studies, University of Utah, Salt Lake City; Kathy Conway, Manager, Oregon-California Trails Association, Independence; Mark L. Gardner, University of New Mexico; Su Richards, Director, Fort Douglas Military Museum, Salt Lake City; Cheryl Brown, editor and publisher, *Black Voice News*, San Bernardino; William Lee, editor and publisher, *The Observer Newspapers*, Sacramento; William and Annette Curtis, Independence; William Loren Katz, New York City; Rush Spedding, Salt Lake City; Malcolm Margolin, Heyday Books, Berkeley; Jeannette Molson, Davis, California; Sharon McGriff Payne, Vallejo, California; Betty Soskin Reid, Berkeley; Constance Moore Richardson, Los Angeles; Sylvia Alden Roberts, Sonora, California; Celeste Rountree and family, Vallejo, California; James Williams and family, Vallejo, California; Michelle Thompson and family, Walnut Creek, California; Charles and Gay Alexander and family, San Jose, California; Bob and Sherry Brennan, Sonora, California; Denise I. Griggs, Sacramento, California; Gladys Harris, Marysville, California; George Jenkins, Pasadena, California; Lorraine Jones, Pasadena, California; Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka; The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Lindell Price, Cameron Park, California; and Joe Louis Moore, Sacramento, California.

## INTRODUCTION

The Western migration that carried nearly 500,000 emigrants over the Oregon, California and Mormon Trails from 1841 to 1869 (the year the transcontinental railroad was completed) was “one of the largest peacetime mass migrations in human history.”<sup>7</sup> Despite the passage of time, however, the story of western migration continues to influence popular imagination and our national culture. In the public’s perception, western migration is replete with tales of rugged individualism, perseverance, ingenuity and heroism and their opposites. The popular understanding of the movement evokes iconic, albeit mistaken, images of straining teams of oxen and horses (rather than mules) yoked to creaking wagons driven by hardy pioneers of European stock, who steadfastly piloted their “prairie schooners” through relentless plains, searing deserts, and heart-stopping mountain passes.<sup>8</sup> The traditional western narrative, no matter how compelling, falls short of the real story of overland migration and the diversity and conflict that defined this undertaking. African American men, women and children were western pioneers too. Enslaved or free, they were an integral part of the human tide that undertook the long journey across the continent. However, the journals, diaries, and letters of white emigrants,

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<sup>7</sup> For total emigration numbers of 500,000, see Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*, 5. Mattes explains his reasons for revising his earlier estimate of 350,000 for the period 1841-1866, which was included in his earlier work, *The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie* (1987; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979). A number of factors contributed to his revision of the 350,000 figure, including broader coverage of emigrant accounts that indicate higher totals, going beyond the numbers shown in the Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie registers to include all probable non-registrants on both sides of the Platte, and allowing for the probability of higher figures for 1859-1866 migrations to Colorado, Nevada, Idaho, and Montana as well as California, Oregon and Utah. For a more conservative estimate of just over 300,000, see Unruh, *The Plains Across*, especially Table 1, 119, in which he sets the 1848 pre-gold rush emigration subtotals at 18,847; and Table 2, 120, in which he sets the 1840-1860 grand total at 296,259. He places the total number of overlanders who emigrated to Oregon, California, and Utah from 1840 to 1860 at 315,106. Todd Guenther, “‘Could These Bones be from a Negro?’ Some African American Experiences on the Oregon-California Trail,” *Overland Journal* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 45, also uses the 350,000 figure.

<sup>8</sup> Archeologist Todd Guenther has stated that the last documented wagon trains rolled through South Pass in present-day Wyoming in 1912. Guenther, “Could these Bones be from a Negro?,” 45.

with few exceptions, are typically indifferent to the black emigrants who traveled overland with white pioneers, sharing the same hazards and dangers that comprised daily life on the trails.

Black people, like their white counterparts, crossed the plains for myriad personal, economic, social, and political reasons. The lure of free land, new business opportunities, and individual autonomy were aspirations shared by both groups. But African American pioneers were not merely “black white [men],” as some American Indians saw them and some white Americans expected them to be.<sup>9</sup> African Americans also trekked westward for reasons rooted in their unique experiences as black people in nineteenth-century America, a nation that relegated them to a subordinate status.

Slaves usually had no choice and no voice in the decision to go west. Each unwilling step down the trail separated them from their families and loved ones left behind. A slave’s only solace was that he or she could somehow gain freedom at the end of the trail—freedom for themselves or eventually for loved ones back home. That cherished hope, so different from the hopes of white emigrants, sustained enslaved black overland pioneers along the way. Black emigrants who were already free went west largely to escape social injustice and economic repression. The “wild” West, especially gold-rush California, was a tumultuous place where industriousness and ingenuity could sometimes trump lines of caste, race and class.

Whether African American pioneers came across the trails as free people or under the dominion of westbound white slave-owners, they did so with an abiding conviction that they were more than anonymous laborers or disposable chattel property. For them the journey held out the possibility that in the West they would be able to establish themselves as human beings worthy of dignity, respect, and freedom.

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<sup>9</sup> Guenther, “Could These Bones be from a Negro?,” 53.

Clearly, the lives, hopes, and expectations of nineteenth century black people differed in critical ways from those of white people. As a result, African Americans understood and experienced the westering journey in ways that white emigrants could not. The study of the African American experience on the trails broadens our understanding of the nature, scope, and meaning of westward migration. The experiences of the thousands of black men and women who came west compel us to reconsider the traditional narrative of our nation's history.

## CHAPTER 1

### RACE, SLAVERY, AND FREEDOM

#### The Early Black Presence

People of African descent have been an integral presence on the American continent since the early days of Spanish and other European exploration. African Americans who set out on the overland trails in the nineteenth century were not the first black people to journey across the continent in search of freedom, riches, land, and adventure. Historian Quintard Taylor has noted that “African American life in the West began with nature’s violence” when Esteban (also known as Estevanico), the Moroccan slave of Spanish explorer Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, accompanied his owner on Pánfilo de Narváez’s 1527-1528 treasure-hunting expedition in the Gulf of Mexico. Narváez’s fleet was destroyed by a hurricane and Esteban, cast ashore with 15 other men, became the first African to set foot in what would later become Texas and the western United States. He and his party endured many hardships, including a starvation winter on a sandbar near present-day Galveston. They were captured by coastal Indians and spent five years enslaved by them. By September 1534, Esteban was one of four survivors of the original party. He and this small group, led by Álvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, escaped their captors and fled into the interior, where they encountered friendly native people. Esteban’s skill and fluency in sign language thrust him into the important roles of interpreter, ambassador, and negotiator with the native populations of the region. His efforts helped the depleted band of conquistadors survive an eight-year, 15,000-mile march across the Southwest. With the help of the Shuman Apaches, whose guidance Esteban helped secure, the group crossed the Rio Grande and trudged through Chihuahua and Sonora, finally arriving in Mexico City in July 1536.

While Esteban is the first and best-known black explorer with the Spanish, he was not the only one. In 1540-1542, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's expedition retraced Esteban's path to the northern frontier. Coronado's company included an entourage of more than 1,000 people, among whom were Africans and Indians. A free black man served as interpreter for Juan de Padilla, the friar for the Coronado company. When Padilla remained behind to minister to the Kansa Indians in 1541, the black interpreter stayed with him.<sup>10</sup>

Nearly 300 years later, a black man named York would travel the West some 40 years before the great overland emigrations commenced. York made his journey as the personal servant and slave of Captain William Clark, who, with Meriwether Lewis, led an exploratory expedition from St. Louis to the Pacific in 1804 to 1806. York was the first documented American slave to cross the continent. As Esteban did for his party three centuries earlier, he contributed crucial interpreting, trading, and scouting skills to the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery expedition. Although much about him remains a mystery, York has been described as "large, dark, agile and strong," and his ability to establish rapport and negotiate with Indian tribes was notable. (see Appendix, Chapter 1, Photo 1). York was recognized and treated as a full member of the party, engaging in decision-making, voting, and hunting. However, his considerable contributions to the expedition were not rewarded with freedom. Instead, Clark chose to hold onto him for another 10 years after the trip, much to the dismay and anger of the

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<sup>10</sup> Esteban, a native of Azamor, on the Atlantic shore of Morocco, was also known as Estevanico, Estevan, Estebanico, Black Stephen, and Stephen the Moor. For Esteban's story and the presence of other early blacks with Spanish expeditions, see Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 27-43; Donald E. Chipman, "Estevanico," *Handbook of Texas Online*, published by the Texas State Historical Association, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fes08>, [accessed January 3, 2012]; George P. Morehouse, "Padilla and the Old Monument near Council Grove," *Kansas Historical Collections* 10 (1908): 472-479. See also "Isabel de Olvera Arrives in New Mexico," in Taylor and Moore, eds., *African American Women Confront the West*, 31; Dedra S. McDonald, "To be Black and Female in the Spanish Southwest," in Taylor and Moore, *African American Women Confront the West*, 32-52; A. D. F. Bandelier, ed., *The Journey of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1905), 52-54, 65; and Rick Moss, "Not Quite Paradise: The Development of the African American Community in Los Angeles Through 1950," *California History* 75, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 222-224.

black man, who wanted to be freed and reunited with his wife in Kentucky. Clark resorted to beating, imprisoning, and threatening York with sale in an unsuccessful effort to break his defiance. Clark finally freed him in 1816, but the black explorer's final fate is unclear. William Clark contended that York hated being free and died while attempting to return to him. Mountain man Zenas Leonard provides another account, which has York living among the Crow Indians as a respected member of the tribe in the 1830s. Still another version of the story contends that York remarried and spent a comfortable life as the owner of a drayage service operating between his home in Louisville, Kentucky, and Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>11</sup> York, mountain man James Beckwourth, mapmaker T. H. Jefferson, and other black frontiersmen helped blaze the trail for overland emigrants who would make their way west in the coming decades.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Question of Race**

Early explorers like Esteban, de Padilla's interpreter, York, and Beckwourth undoubtedly were of African ancestry. But the issue of race—who was “white” and who was not—became a pressing one for the Europeans who colonized the “New World.” From the beginning, race has been a complex and contentious subject in America. By the sixteenth century, it was becoming a social rather than a national or biological identity. By the time of the great overland emigrations,

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<sup>11</sup> Darrell Millner, “York,” *The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/york> [accessed September 18, 2010]; Darrell M. Millner, “York of the Corps of Discovery: Interpretations of York's Character and His Role in the Lewis and Clark Expedition,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (Fall 2003): 2-25 <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ohq/104.3/millner.html> [accessed September 18, 2010]; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 48-49.

<sup>12</sup> These are only a few of the early black explorers who lived and worked in the West before the era of overland emigration. Other significant African American trailblazers include Edward Rose, the son of a white trader and a black-Cherokee woman who joined the Manuel Lisa fur trading expedition to the Bighorn River in present-day Wyoming in 1806. He periodically worked as a guide, hunter, and trapper for several fur-trading companies, but lived as a valued member of two Indian nations, learning their languages and customs. The Absaroka (Crow) nation adopted him in 1807, and the Arikara did so in 1830 in what is now South Dakota. Rose allied himself with the Indian societies against potential enemies and was an important link with world of the fur traders. See Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 49-50. Peter Ranne, a black member of Jedediah Smith's Southwest Expedition of 1826, trapped beaver throughout the Cache Valley and traveled as far as present-day San Bernardino, California. Polette Labross was a “mulatto” (a person of mixed race) who took part in Smith's second expedition in 1827. See Ronald Coleman, “A History of Blacks in Utah” (PhD diss., University of Utah, 1980), 28-29.

it was being used (though not always successfully) to thwart attempts by African Americans (and others) to contest their status and define themselves.

Beginning in Hispaniola in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Spanish explorers slaughtered and attempted to enslave the Indian peoples they encountered, believing them to be culturally and racially inferior. Historian Winthrop Jordan has written that among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans, “the most common assumption was that the original color of man was white.” Deviation from the original was evidence of degeneration and inferiority. Variations from the original needed to be eliminated or, at very least, controlled for the sake of a well-ordered and moral society. Therefore, the need to differentiate between “white” and “other” gave rise to a system of racial categories based on an “imagined quantum of blood” and certain physical characteristics.<sup>13</sup>

In the territories held by Spain and Mexico, an elaborate system of racial classification was put in place. The Spanish “*Sistema de Castas*” (System of Castes) was a hierarchy of more than 40 racial classifications (*castizo*, *morisco*, *mestizo*, *mulatto*, *indio*, *negro*, etc.) designed to delineate degrees of whiteness. For social and political purposes *negro* (black) was the least desirable, while *español* (Spanish) was the most desirable. Under this system, people of African ancestry were also vulnerable to enslavement, exploitation, and marginalization, but still might achieve a measure of social and economic mobility. This was particularly true on the frontier of New Spain (what is now northern Mexico and the southwestern United States) where people were needed to establish settlements. African American history curator Rick Moss has observed that the type of rigid social discrimination based on race that had emerged in the United States

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<sup>13</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 248-259; Nicholas Hudson, “Nation to ‘Race’: The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought,” *American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies* 29, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 247-264, especially 252-258; Walter Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave, and the Politics of Racial Determination in the 1850s,” *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 1 (June 2000): 13-38, especially 16-17.



“failed to take root in the complex multiracial society” of the Spanish and Mexican territories of the West. With the American takeover of the Mexican holdings in the mid-nineteenth century, however, the relative social fluidity enjoyed by people of color ended.<sup>14</sup>

White Americans began to set aside the long-held definition of race as nationality and adopted a new one that emphasized ethnicity and color. As early as the first decades of the seventeenth century, European colonizers on the eastern seaboard were enacting laws designed to define “white” and “other.” For blacks and Indians, consignment to the category of “other” often meant enslavement. Permanent, hereditary servitude (chattel slavery) became the primary indicator of race, and color became “the sign of slavery.”<sup>15</sup> African Americans and other people of color, including Indians, Asians, and Hawaiians (Kanakas) were classified as “others,” and were given the same racial identity and social status. By the nineteenth century, the “one drop rule” was the standard for determining race in the United States. It dictated that an individual with any degree of “African blood” was black and therefore presumed to be a slave or subject to enslavement. The one-drop rule took precedence over parentage and birthplace. It was invoked irrespective of skin color or degree of “whiteness,” and it blocked social and economic mobility. Race became an expedient means by which to confer or deny inclusion in society.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Herbert G. Ruffin II, “Sistema de Castas (1500s-ca.-1829),” *The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/sistema-de-castas-1500s-ca-1829> [accessed July 4, 2011]; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 37-48; McDonald, “To Be Black and Female in the Spanish Southwest,” 35-49; Moss, “Not Quite Paradise,” 225.

<sup>15</sup> Theresa Zackodnik, “Fixing the Color Line: The Mulatto, Southern Courts, and Racial Identity,” *American Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (September 2001): 420-451, especially 420-430, 432, 433 for quote, and 448 n26.

<sup>16</sup> Jordan, *White Over Black*, 44-98; Hudson, “Nation to Race,” 248-253; and Zackodnik, “Fixing the Color Line,” 420-430, 432-433, 448 n26, 451 n90. A Negro was defined as having as little as one-fourth, one-eighth, one-sixteenth, one-thirty-second, or one drop of “black blood.” In addition, inspections of skin, hair, nose, teeth, fingernails, and even feet were used to determine race. See also Victoria E. Bynum, “‘White Negroes’ in Segregated Mississippi: Miscegenation, Racial Identity, and the Law,” *Journal of Southern History* 64, no. 2 (May 1998): 247-276, especially 266; and Johnson, “The Slave Trader, the White Slave,” 21-25.

## The Evolution of Their Status

The transformation of the status of black men and women occurred as European settlement of North America increased and the demand for labor rose. By the time of the great overland migrations, black people lived within a political and social context that had been established to deny them their humanity, restrict their liberty, and frustrate their aspirations. The racially restrictive environment in which black western emigration took place evolved over a relatively short period of time and was influenced by a number of economic, social, and political factors.

In the seventeenth century, when the British established colonies in North America, people of African descent were among the first settlers, arriving as slaves, indentured servants, or free people. Although historians continue to debate the legal status of the first black arrivals in the colonies, black residents and white indentured servants alike often shared the same state of “half freedom.”<sup>17</sup> In many cases, blacks’ status was indistinguishable from that of white indentured servants. Until the mid-seventeenth century, a number of black colonists were able to benefit from permeable racial boundaries that often allowed them to successfully petition for freedom, purchase their liberty, and own property.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, census records and other documents show that white colonists routinely differentiated between themselves as “*Englishe*” and blacks as “Negroes,” and black colonial

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<sup>17</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, “Modern Tensions and the Origins of American Slavery,” *The Journal of Southern History* 28, no. 1 (February 1962): 20.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of black colonists successfully gaining freedom, see Warren M. Billings, “The Case of Fernando and Elizabeth Key: A Note on the Status of Blacks in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 30, no. 3 (July 1973): 467-474, especially 471-473; and Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *The African American Odyssey*, combined 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2010), 60. For a discussion of similarities between white indentured servants and blacks, see Lois E. Horton, “From Class to Race in Early America: Northern Post-Emancipation Racial Reconstruction,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 4, (Winter 1999): 562-649, especially 630-631.

residents experienced different treatment than their white counterparts.<sup>19</sup> Whites often identified blacks arriving in the colonies not by name (as was the case for white arrivals), but by color, age and sex—as they might identify horses or cattle. Field labor was assigned routinely to black servant women, while indentured white women generally worked around the home. Typically, white indentured servants who ran away were punished with extra time added to their terms of labor. However, as early as 1640, captured black runaway servants in Virginia were being sentenced to lifetime servitude.<sup>20</sup>

As the cultivation of lucrative staple crops like tobacco and rice expanded and began to drive colonial economies, the demand for a permanent labor source increasingly targeted Africans and their descendants. The ambiguous racial status of the earlier period hardened into a system of chattel slavery that cast people of African ancestry into permanent, hereditary bondage.<sup>21</sup> By the mid-seventeenth century, chattel slavery had become a visible presence in all thirteen colonies, and it dominated race relations in the colonial era.

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<sup>19</sup> Quotes from Jordan, “Modern Tensions and the Origins of American Slavery,” 22.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion of the distinctions white colonists drew between themselves and black colonists, see Jordan, “Modern Tensions and the Origins of American Slavery,” 22-23. Jordan notes that the John Punch incident of 1640 was the first “definite indication of outright enslavement” in any English colony. In this case, the General Court of Virginia punished an interracial group of indentured servants who had run away and were recaptured. The two white men were ordered to serve their masters for an additional year, and the colony for three more. John Punch, the black runaway in the group, was sentenced to “serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural life.” Later that same year in Virginia, a band of seven runaways was apprehended. This time, six white men in the group were sentenced to additional years of service, but the lone black man in the party received none. Jordan speculates this was because he was already serving for life. See Jordan, *White Over Black*, 75. For the status of blacks in the early British colonies, see Hine et al., *The African-American Odyssey*, 53-54, and 59 for the account John Punch and the treatment of black and white runaways. Also see John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), 56-61; Russell R. Menard, *Migrants, Servants and Slaves: Unfree Labor in Colonial British America* (Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2001); and Billings, “The Case of Fernando and Elizabeth Key,” 467-474.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed examination of the transformation of the status of black people from ambiguous status to chattel property during the colonial period, see Jordan, *White over Black*; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975); Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina, from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousand Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

## The Contagion of Liberty

When the American Revolution plunged colonists into the War for Independence, white American revolutionaries, proclaiming themselves slaves to British oppression, compared their struggle against British political and economic control to the plight of the blacks they themselves held in bondage. Their wartime declarations of egalitarianism and their rhetoric of inalienable rights often were extended to include black people. Revolutionary zeal even led some white Americans to propose the abolition of slavery altogether.<sup>22</sup>

The contagion of liberty that gripped white Americans in the Revolutionary era also spread to the African American population. Blacks embraced the egalitarian philosophy and viewed the war as their pathway to freedom. Historian Gary Nash has called the American Revolution the “largest slave uprising in our nation’s history.” Regardless of the uniform they might wear, African Americans fought to liberate themselves. Ten to 20 times more blacks (mostly slaves and some free), however, allied themselves with the Loyalists forces rather than with the Patriots. Many blacks perceived Britain to be more advanced in the anti-slavery fight. This perception was fueled in part by events that had taken place in England as revolutionary fervor was building in America. The 1772 Somersett decision (sometimes spelled Somerset) gave black and white abolitionists cause for optimism. The closely-watched case involved a slaveholder who had returned to Great Britain from Virginia with his slave, and wanted to sell him to a plantation in the Caribbean. The court handed down a carefully worded decision that denied slave-owners living in Britain the right to deport their slaves back to the colonies. The ruling did not affect the 14,000 black slaves held in Britain, nor did it abolish slavery throughout

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<sup>22</sup> For the impact of Revolutionary rhetoric on abolitionism during the war, see Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 5-7; Horton, “From Class to Race in Early America,” 637-638; and Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison: Madison House, 1990), 3-20, 58-59, 91-110. For a meticulous analysis of the impact of Revolutionary ideology and the problem of slavery, see Jordan, *White Over Black*, especially 269-342.

the British Empire as some mistakenly believed—that did not happen until 1833. Nonetheless, anti-slavery forces in Britain and America hailed the *Somerset* decision as a signal of slavery’s imminent demise.<sup>23</sup>

African Americans also had other, pragmatic reasons for allying themselves with the British during the Revolution. In an effort to quell the uprising in its early stages, royal officials had established lines of informal cooperation with slaves and offered to grant perpetual freedom to any slave or indentured servant who left his or her owner to join the British forces. By 1774 in Virginia, British officials had begun to consider exploiting the tension between slaves and their owners, and to encourage slave rebellions as a strategy to preserve British rule. In 1775, John Murray, the fourth earl of Dunmore and Virginia’s last royal governor, promised freedom to all slaves and indentured servants who enlisted in the British army. Thomas Jefferson estimated that nearly 30,000 blacks in Virginia alone fled to the British forces in response to this decree. In other parts of the South and in the North, thousands of slaves escaped to the British whenever they were nearby.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 57-59; Gary B. Nash, “African Americans in the Early Republic,” *Magazine of History*, 14, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 12. In the case of *Somerset v. Stewart*, the slave James Somerset sued for his freedom and received it because his owner had brought him from Virginia to England and then attempted to ship him to Jamaica. In the 1772 ruling, the English court held that British laws did not uphold slavery. The court ruled that slavery was so “odious” a matter that its existence and protection required positive law; that is, laws that were specifically passed by the government and in the law books. The court decided that no slave could be removed forcibly from Britain and sold. This ruling heartened British anti-slavery forces and led many blacks and whites on both sides of the Atlantic to believe, mistakenly, that slavery had been abolished throughout the British Empire. In reality, it did not grant liberty to blacks held in bondage, nor did it change the status of slaves in Britain’s overseas colonies. For details about the complexities and implications of the *Somerset* case, see George van Cleve, “‘Somerset’s Case’ and Its Antecedents in Imperial Perspective,” *Law and History Review*, 24, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 601-645; Jerome Nadelhaft, “The *Somerset* Case and Slavery: Myth, Reality, and Repercussions,” *The Journal of Negro History* 51, no. 3 (July 1966): 193-208; Deirdre Coleman, “Janet Schaw and the Complexions of Empire,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 169-193; and Karen Robbins, “Power among the Powerless: Domestic Resistance by Free and Slave Women in the McHenry Family of the New Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 23, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 47-68.

<sup>24</sup> Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 59-62; Thomas Jefferson to William Gordon, July 16, 1788, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 13, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953-1958), 364; Woody Holton, “‘Rebel against Rebel’: Enslaved Virginians and the Coming of the American Revolution,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 105, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 157-192; Charles W. Carey, Jr., “‘These Black Rascals’: The Origins of Lord Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment,” *Virginia Social Science Journal*, 31, (1996): 65-77.

White Americans denounced the British for inciting slave uprisings and forbade black enlistment in state militias and the army. However, in light of the overwhelming black response to the Dunmore Proclamation, and faced with mounting troop shortages, George Washington lifted the ban on black enlistment in the Continental Army. American fighting forces actively began to recruit African Americans. Historian Benjamin Quarles noted that black loyalties were not to a “place nor to a people, but to a principle.” Nowhere was this more evident than in the ranks of Lord Dunmore’s “Ethiopian Regiment” who fought alongside British troops wearing uniforms emblazoned with the motto, “Liberty to Slaves.”<sup>25</sup> After winning independence, however, most white Americans quickly abandoned their egalitarian ideals in favor of the economic and social practicalities of nation-building.

### **Permanent, Hereditary Chattel: A Snapshot of Antebellum Slavery in the South, Indian Territory, and Border States**

After the Revolution, a great deal of the new nation’s economic prosperity was dependent on slave labor, and the majority of African Americans resided in the South as slaves. Four million men, women, and children lived under a system of chattel slavery that dominated every aspect of their lives. While each southern state had its own set of slave codes, all followed a common pattern. Most prohibited slave gatherings (including religious services) without white supervision, forbade teaching slaves to read, and prohibited them from bearing firearms, legally marrying, or traveling without the written permission of their owners or overseers.

Free blacks in the South, although they did not have owners, were nonetheless far from free. Most Southern black codes placed the burden of proof of freedom on the black person. Failure to prove free status could result in enslavement. This was also the case for failure to pay

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<sup>25</sup> Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 60-61; Carey, “These Black Rascals,” 61-72; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), vii. “Liberty to slaves” quote in Holton, “‘Rebel against Rebel’,” 182.

debts, court fines, or taxes. Black laws prevented free black southerners from voting, holding office, or testifying in court against a white person. Georgia laws barred free blacks from owning property.<sup>26</sup>

In the early national era, slavery became more deeply entrenched in the South and gradually faded out in the North. In 1793, the introduction of the cotton gin caused a boom in cotton production and rapidly expanded southern slavery beyond the Appalachian Mountains. The success of Eli Whitney's cotton gin encouraged slaveholders to try their hand at growing cotton in southern Missouri in the early 1800s. Other planters brought in slaves, mostly from Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina, to grow other crops in areas that could not support cotton. By 1810 there were 3,011 slaves and 607 free blacks living in Missouri Territory; the 1820 census recorded 97,797 "bondsmen" and 376 black freemen.<sup>27</sup>

The lot of plantation slaves in the Old South is well known, but plantations were rare in the border states. In Missouri, most slaveholders were small landowners who kept one or two slaves or a single black family, and these toiled as general field and farm workers and domestic servants. Fieldwork included planting and processing cotton, tobacco, and hemp, Missouri's primary crops. Slaves often worked as crew on Missouri River boats or as blacksmiths and engineers in the iron industry, and a considerable number labored in lead and salt mines—hired out by owners who collected their pay.<sup>28</sup>

Missouri joined the Union as a slave state in 1821 under the terms of the Missouri Compromise, legislation designed to maintain the delicate balance of slave and free states. The

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<sup>26</sup> *Encyclopedia of Black America*, ed. W. Augustus Low and Virgil Clift (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), s. v. "Slavery."

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*. The 1810 data is from Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864, 601, and 1820 data is from the Fourth Census for the United States, 40, as reported in Harrison Anthony Trexler, *Slavery in Missouri, 1804-1865* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1914), 9, <http://www.dinsdoc.com/trexler-1-0b.htm> [accessed April 12, 2011].

<sup>28</sup> Trexler, *Slavery in Missouri*, 20-26; *Encyclopedia of Black America*, s. v. "Slavery in selected states: Missouri."

state's constitution prohibited slaves from being emancipated without the consent of the slave owner and without compensation to the owner, and state law restricted a slave from owning any personal property, including his or her own clothing, furnishings, and work tools; from buying and selling without written permission; and from entering contracts. In 1860, a Missouri court heard the case of a slave who had been sold by his master *after* having purchased his own freedom and despite holding a receipt proving payment in full. The court denied the bondsman the right to sue his owner and refused to enforce any contract between master and slave "even where there might be complete fulfillment on the part of the slave."<sup>29</sup> The year that case was heard, Missouri was home to 114,931 slaves (about 10 percent of the state's total population), and 3,572 free blacks.<sup>30</sup> This was a relatively low proportion of slaves compared to Southern states, but Missouri was a western border state, not a keystone of the Old South. It was, nonetheless, deeply steeped in southern mores, culture, and law. Other territories and states settled largely by Southerners developed similar traits.

In the early 1820s, Southerners moving west to join Stephen Austin's American colony in Mexican Tejas carried slavery along with them. By 1825, there were 443 black bondsmen in Tejas.<sup>31</sup> Despite Mexico's abolishing slavery in 1829, authorities made no attempt to eliminate slavery in its northern provinces. By 1835, "fully 10 percent of English-speaking Texans were slaves."<sup>32</sup> The Texas Revolution against Mexico flared that year largely over slavery issues, and the resulting Republic of Texas legalized the institution. At that time, 1836, approximately 5,000 black bondsmen lived there; four years later, the Texas slave population numbered 11,323.<sup>33</sup> The

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<sup>29</sup> *Redmond (colored) v. Murray et al.*, 30 Mo., quoted in Trexler, *Slavery in Missouri*, 64.

<sup>30</sup> 1860 Census, reported in Trexler, *Slavery in Missouri*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Alwyn Barr, *Black Texas: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1996), 17.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Barr, *Black Texas*, 17.



new republic's constitution stated that free black individuals already living in Texas must petition congress for permission to remain, but the legislature later voted to allow them to stay. Free blacks had no rights of citizenship, however. Black persons—anyone of at least 1/8 African blood—could not vote, own property, or testify against whites in a court of law.<sup>34</sup> Texas joined the Union as a slave state in 1845, and on the eve of the Civil War in 1860 the slave population there stood at 182,921, or 30 percent of the state's total population.<sup>35</sup>

Slavery expanded into present-day Oklahoma in the 1830s as a direct result of the forced relocation of American Indian tribes from their homes in the South to Indian Territory. Cherokees and Creeks (Muskogee), in particular, had adopted some distinctive Southern social and economic practices, including plantation agriculture and black slavery. The Cherokee alone took several hundred African American slaves to Indian Territory in 1838; of those, 175 died on the Trail of Tears. Chickasaws, Seminoles, and Choctaws were slaveholders, as well. By 1860, more than 7,000 slaves (about 14 percent of the total population) resided in Indian Territory.<sup>36</sup> So deep were the tribes' Southern roots that in 1861 the Cherokee Nation would issue a decree of support for the South in the “War of Northern Aggression” and muster troops to fight for the Confederacy.<sup>37</sup>

Political tensions reached a boiling point when the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 repealed the Missouri Compromise, established Kansas Territory, and permitted residents to determine by popular vote whether they would enter the Union as a free state or a slave state. Within days of the act's passage, hundreds of Missouri “emigrants” surged into Kansas to claim

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> 1860 Census, reported in Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 64, 67.

<sup>37</sup> *Declaration by the People of the Cherokee Nation of the Causes which have Impelled Them to Unite their Fortunes with those of the Confederate States of America*, Tahlequah, Cherokee Nation, October 28, 186, repr., n.d., <http://www.unitednativeamerica.com/choerokee.html> [accessed April 12, 2011].

land and help carry the vote for slavery; and non-resident abolitionists likewise flooded in to ensure that Kansas would be a free-soil state. “Bleeding Kansas” became a violent flashpoint of the North-South conflict over the western expansion of slavery as raiders of both persuasions, pro- and anti-slavery, crossed the Missouri-Kansas border to punish the opposition. In 1860, as civil war loomed, the U.S. Census documented only two slaves and 625 “Free Colored” residents in Kansas.<sup>38</sup> In the South and the border states, slavery rested solidly on a legal and social foundation established to ensure that African Americans remain perpetual, hereditary chattel property and that the small free black population would languish as a powerless, subordinate class.

### **Northern “Unfreedom”**

In the North, where economies did not depend on slave labor after the Revolution, legislatures and courts quickly moved to abolish slavery and adopted a policy of gradual emancipation. These actions compelled African Americans to continue in bondage for a specific number of years after the enactment of the state’s abolition laws, or until they or their children reached a specified age.<sup>39</sup> In 1800, nearly 37,000 northern blacks, most residing in New York and New Jersey, remained in legal servitude. By 1830, Northern states had virtually abolished slavery, with only 3,568 blacks, most in New Jersey, still in bondage.<sup>40</sup>

Although Northerners had distaste for chattel slavery and adamantly opposed the expansion of slavery into the western states and territories, most did not want free blacks

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<sup>38</sup> Kansas State Historical Society and the Kansas Collection of the University of Kansas, “Immigration and Early Settlement,” Online 1854-1861, A Virtual Repository for Territorial Kansas History <http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php?SCREEN=immigration> [accessed April 12, 2011].

<sup>39</sup> Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 34.

<sup>40</sup> These Northern states abolished slavery: Vermont in 1777, Ohio in 1802, Illinois in 1818, Indiana in 1816, Massachusetts and New Hampshire in 1783, Pennsylvania in 1780, Rhode Island in 1784, Connecticut in 1784 and 1797, New York in 1799 and 1817, and New Jersey in 1804. See Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 3, 14-15.

migrating into Northern cities. This attitude grew out of fear that a flood of cheap black labor would undercut white men's wages; later, out of poor whites' perception that they were being drafted to fight on behalf of slaves in the Civil War; and in no small part out of white society's deep-rooted racial prejudices. To discourage free African Americans from settling in their communities, Northerners passed "black laws" that denied black residents citizenship, suffrage, and property rights. For example, in 1788 Massachusetts barred blacks from residing there longer than two months under penalty of imprisonment, whipping, and hard labor. By 1803, Indiana had banned blacks from testifying in court, from voting, and from serving in the militia. Additionally Indiana levied a \$3 tax against all black men. Similarly, Ohio required blacks to post a \$500 bond upon entering the state. Even Wisconsin, with the smallest black population of the Old Northwest, passed an anti-black suffrage law. African Americans living under black laws often bore the brunt of white violence and had no recourse to redress their grievances in the courts or by petition. In 1839, Ohio black laws forbade African Americans from petitioning for any reason whatsoever.<sup>41</sup>

As early as 1827, Cincinnati, Ohio city officials began harshly enforcing state black laws, targeting its 2,258 African American residents (9.4 percent of the total population of 24,148). Citing economic competition from black workers, city fathers implemented a campaign intended to curb black population growth by imposing fines and barring blacks from skilled trades.<sup>42</sup> In response, African American residents organized an emigration society, hoping to resettle Cincinnati blacks elsewhere. Canada seemed like a promising place to many black residents. In June 1829, the emigration society elected Thomas Crissup (who had migrated to Cincinnati

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<sup>41</sup> Katz, *The Black West*, 54-55, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Nikki Taylor, "Reconsidering the 'Forced' Exodus of 1829: Free Black Emigration from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Wilberforce, Canada," *The Journal of African American History* 87 (Summer 2002): 283-302, especially 290-291. For population numbers, see especially 285.

before 1820) and Israel Lewis (who had settled in the city after escaping slavery with his wife) to travel to Upper Canada and purchase land for an all-black settlement. After meeting with and receiving encouragement from John Colbourne, the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, Crissup and Lewis bought 4,000 acres for \$1.50 an acre (the present-day equivalent of \$143,000). The land was located in Biddulph Township, along the Au Sable River, less than 20 miles from Lake Huron and the Thames River and eight miles from Lake Erie, in Ontario, Canada. They named the settlement Wilberforce, after British emancipation advocate William Wilberforce. It was intended to be an independent, rural agricultural settlement where farmers would raise cattle and cultivate crops. Before the exodus could begin, however, whites in Cincinnati began a week-long rampage against blacks in the city. The August 1829 outbreak of rioting, in which mobs of rock-throwing, armed whites destroyed black homes, buildings, and businesses, gave more urgency to African Americans' plans to leave Cincinnati.<sup>43</sup>

During the riot, between 1,100 and 1,500 blacks fled Cincinnati.<sup>44</sup> Some individuals and families, many without the resources to travel far, fled to nearby cities such as Glendale, Hamilton, and Lebanon, but returned once the situation had calmed down. However, a group under the leadership of James C. Brown, a former Kentucky slave who had purchased his freedom, set out for Canada. This group mobilized all its resources to make the 377-mile journey on foot and with wagons through Ohio, across Lake Erie from Sandusky, and on to Canada.<sup>45</sup> Between 460 and 2,000 black emigrants made the trip to Canada, but most never settled in Wilberforce, preferring to live in the more established Canadian cities where work was more readily available.

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<sup>43</sup> Taylor, "Reconsidering the 'Forced' Exodus," 283-302. For the enforcement of black laws and oppression of blacks, see 286-287. For a discussion of immigration plans to Canada before the 1829 race riot and Wilberforce, see 287-293.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, "Reconsidering the 'Forced' Exodus," 291.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 289, 292.

Just one year after the Cincinnati riot, white mobs in Portsmouth, Ohio forced 80 of the town's 200 black residents to flee. In 1835, another riot in Cincinnati targeted abolitionist officials, abolitionist presses, and black neighborhoods and businesses. In 1846, Ohio whites also objected to the presence of freed slaves who had been emancipated by Senator John Randolph of Roanoke, Virginia. Randolph's will called for the manumission of his 383 slaves, who were to be resettled in a free state on land purchased with funds from his estate. The executor of the will paid \$38,000 to buy 3,200 acres of land in Mercer County, Ohio, for the former slaves, but hostile whites confronted the black newcomers when they attempted to settle in Carthagena (northwest of Columbus). The freedmen were forced to seek shelter with sympathetic white and black families or to move on.<sup>46</sup>

Race riots also erupted in other northern urban locations, including Detroit, Philadelphia, Utica, and Buffalo. This violence killed and injured hundreds of African Americans and devastated black communities. The New York City draft riot of 1863 was the grimmest of the northern race upheavals. Mobs of angry whites (many of them Irish immigrants who resented that blacks were exempt from the draft and feared black workplace competition), tore through the city, lynching blacks from street-corner lamp poles, murdering others in their homes, and burning down an African American orphanage. Upwards of 100 black people were killed in the four-day rampage.<sup>47</sup> The climate of anti-black hostility and violence that prevailed in the early

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<sup>46</sup> J. Stephen Ellingson, "Understanding the Dialectic of Discourse and Collective Action: Public Debate and Rioting in Antebellum Cincinnati," *The American Journal of Sociology* 1, no. 1 (July 1995): 100-144, especially 116-117; Joan E. Cashin, "Black Families in the Old Northwest," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15, no. 3, Special Issue on Gender in the Early Republic (Autumn 1995): 449-475, especially 451-452; J. Reuben Sheeler, "The Struggle of the Negro in Ohio for Freedom," *The Journal of Negro History* 31, no. 2 (April 1946): 208-226, see especially 212-214. For an account of Randolph's former slaves and their heirs' legal battle to reclaim their land, see Frank F. Mathias, "John Randolph's Freedmen: The Thwarting of a Will," *The Journal of Southern History*, 39 no. 2 (May 1973): 263-272.

<sup>47</sup> For a detailed account of anti-black violence in northern cities, see James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991 edition), 69-78; Leonard R. Riforgiato, "Bishop Timon, Buffalo, and the Civil War," *Catholic Historical Review* 73, no. 1

nineteenth century America led to the formation in 1830 of the American Society of Free Persons of Color, which held its first convention in Philadelphia. Outraged by the Cincinnati riot, the Society advocated black colonization to Canada and initiated the black convention movement—a movement that would spread westward with the black overland emigrants.<sup>48</sup>

By the 1850s, some 200,000 Northern blacks, freed or free-born, lived in a state of “unfreedom.” Thanks to black laws that deprived them of basic civil rights, African Americans were reduced to living as squatters in the states in which many had been born and had resided for generations.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Nature of Freedom in the West**

Freedom in the West did not come easily. Historian William Loren Katz has noted that black laws established in the East “moved westward with the pioneer’s wagons,” spreading first to the western territories carved from the Old Northwest (Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio).<sup>50</sup> In these regions, fear of the increasing influx of African Americans resulted in constitutional provisions or legislation intended to prevent their entry and restrict their rights.

In the territories of New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada, African Americans made up a small percentage of the total population. Like their counterparts elsewhere in the West, blacks in these places were plagued by exclusionary laws and discriminatory policies.

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(January 1987): 62-80; Michael P. McCarthy, “The Philadelphia Consolidation of 1854: A Reappraisal,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 110, no. 4 (October 1986): 531-548, especially 533-535; Carl E. Prince, “The Great ‘Riot Year’: Jacksonian Democracy and Patterns of Violence in 1834,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 1-19; and John A. Williams, “The Long Hot Summers of Yesteryear,” *The History Teacher* 1, no. 3 (March 1968): 9-23.

<sup>48</sup> For a summary of the free black convention movement emerging in the aftermath of the Cincinnati riot and the public dialogue among African Americans about emigration to Canada, see Taylor, “Reconsidering the ‘Forced’ Exodus of 1829,” especially 295-297.

<sup>49</sup> Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 15. The term “unfreedom” was used in an influential article by historians Oscar and Mary F. Handlin, “Origins of the Southern Labor System,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (April 1950): 199-222. See especially 200, 204, 206.

<sup>50</sup> Katz, *The Black West*, 54-55, 57.

Indian indentured servitude and slavery and Mexican peonage were the major sources of coerced labor in New Mexico Territory. The Compromise of 1850 was the important factor in determining slave policies in New Mexico. A key part of the legislation provided that slavery in New Mexico (and in Utah Territory) would be determined by popular sovereignty. In New Mexico Territory, African American slaves never exceeded a dozen or so, and the total black population remained small.<sup>51</sup> Despite the relative absence of African Americans in the territory, New Mexico legislators rapidly established an array of anti-black laws. To prevent fugitive and freed Texas slaves from coming into New Mexico, officials enacted a law in 1856 that limited the number of free blacks who could enter the territory. New Mexico's first slave code was established in 1859. The measure restricted slave travel, prevented blacks from giving testimony in court, and limited slave-owners' right to arm slaves except in defense against Indian raids.<sup>52</sup>

Even before the Civil War, the southern portion of New Mexico Territory, generally referred to as Arizona, was a hotbed of Southern sentiment. In 1860, the inhabitants living there took matters into their own hands and named the region the Territory of Arizona, making the town of Mesilla (the main route between Texas and California) the territorial capital. Pro-Confederate residents of the Territory of Arizona (Americans and Mexicans) voted to secede from the Union in 1861 and declared the region to be the Confederate Territory of Arizona. In

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<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of the creation of the New Mexico Territory and the Compromise of 1850, see B. Sacks, "The Creation of the Territory of Arizona," *Arizona and the West* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1963): 29-62, part 1 of 2 parts. In 1860, New Mexico's black population was only 85 (of a total population of 93,516). By 1870, that number had increased to 172 (of a total population of 91,874). In 1870 Arizona Territory, blacks numbered 26 (of a total population 9,658). For population figures, see Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 74-76, 104, especially the charts "Black Population in Western States and Territories, 1860," 76, and "The African American Population in Western United States and Territories, 1860-70," 104. Taylor's figures for blacks in New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada Territories are based on the 1860 Census, *iv*. See also U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 43, 44; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistics of the Population of the United States, 1870* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 3; and Michael F. Doran, "Population Statistics of Nineteenth Century Indian Territory," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 53, no. 4 (Winter 1975): 501.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 74-75; Barret Kaubisch, "New Mexico Territory Slave Code (1859-1867)," *The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/new-mexico-territory-slave-code-1859-1867> [accessed April 14, 2011].

1862, after Union forces defeated the Confederates in the crucial battle of Glorieta Pass, the federal government regained control of the area. That same year, Congress banned slavery in all the territories. In 1863, Congress recognized Arizona (now located west of the 109<sup>th</sup> meridian) as an official territory of the United States. African Americans in the new Arizona Territory, however, continued to be legally discriminated against and prohibited from participating equally with whites.<sup>53</sup>

Similar conditions prevailed for the small African American population in Nevada. The federal census of 1860 enumerated only 44 blacks living in the portion of Utah Territory that would later become Nevada. Blacks residing there made up 0.6 percent of the total population and clustered around the Virginia City and Gold Hill areas in the western part of the territory.<sup>54</sup> Nevada historian Elmer R. Rusco has observed that “Nevada was racist during the territorial and early statehood period.”<sup>55</sup> Although there was a great deal of anti-slavery and pro-Union sentiment in the territory, Nevada lawmakers made it clear that their priority was to “legislate for white men.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 75; Kaubisch, “New Mexico Territory Slave Code.” For a discussion of Arizona Territory, the Confederate Territory of Arizona, and pro-southern sentiments, see Martin Hardwick Hall, “The *Mesilla Times*: A Journal of Confederate Arizona,” *Arizona and the West* 5 no. 4 (Winter 1963): 337-351; Sacks, “The Creation of the Arizona Territory,” part 1, especially 58-59; B. Sacks, “The Creation of the Territory of Arizona,” *Arizona and the West*, 5, no. 2 (Summer 1963): 109-148, part 2 of 2 parts. For a discussion of the Battle of Glorieta Pass, see National Park Service, CWSAC Battle Summaries, “Glorieta Pass,” A Project of the American Battlefield Protection Program, <http://www.nps.gov/hps/abpp/battles/nm002.htm> [accessed April 26, 2011]; Robert G. Athearn, “West of Appomattox: Civil War beyond the Great River: A Stage-Setting Interpretation,” *Montana Magazine of Western History* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1962): 2-11; Lewis D. W. Hall, “A Summation of Events,” *Montana Magazine of Western History*, 12, no. 2 (Spring 1962): 12-15.

<sup>54</sup> For black Nevada population figures, see Elmer R. Rusco, “*Good Time Coming?*” *Black Nevadans in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), 14-16, 124, especially Table 1, Black Population of Nevada, 1860-1870. Rusco’s population figures are based on Daniel O. Price, *Changing Characteristics of the Negro Population* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 9, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Rusco, “*Good Time Coming?*,” 21.

<sup>56</sup> Rusco, “*Good Time Coming?*,” 22. This statement was made by Territorial Assemblyman Abraham Curry, who was objecting to a House resolution that proposed banning the sale of firearms and ammunition to Indians. Curry opposed the provision, observing that Indians relied on these resources for their livelihood. He conceded that territorial representatives had met “to legislate for white men, but that was no reason for starving the Indians.” Curry’s remarks are quoted in Andrew J. Marsh, *Letters from Nevada Territory, 1861-1862*, ed. William C. Miller,



In 1861, the Nevada legislature passed a measure banning slavery, but subsequently enacted laws that limited the franchise to whites and prohibited non-whites from holding office, serving on juries, testifying against whites in court, and joining the militia. No provisions were made for the public education of non-white children, and intermarriage between whites and nonwhites (including backs, mulattos [mixed race], Indians, and Chinese) was criminalized. When Nevada entered the Union in 1864, lawmakers drafted a constitution that continued the earlier racial policies, but in 1865 the law governing testimony was modified to allow blacks to testify in court under limited conditions. However, the state constitution specifically excluded African American children from public schools unless separate schools were established for them.<sup>57</sup>

Like the Northern states, far western territories also established anti-black emigrant laws. Peter H. Burnett, a newly elected member of the Oregon provisional government in 1844, introduced a bill that banned slavery from Oregon Territory but exacted severe penalties on any black people who wished to reside in the territory. The Oregon Provisional Government enacted that bill, known as the Oregon Black Exclusion Law, or, infamously, as the “Lash Law,” in June 1844. Specifically, Burnett’s law required all black persons over the age of 18 to leave Oregon within two years (if male) or three years (if female), or be subjected to 20 to 39 lashes from a whip. This treatment was to be repeated every six months “until he or she shall quit the territory.” However, the law was amended six months later, before going into effect: instead of being whipped, a black person found guilty of remaining illegally in the territory would be forced to labor for a white “employer” for a short period, after which the “employer” had six

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Russell W. McDonald, and Ann Rollins (Carson City, Nev.: Legislative Counsel Bureau, 1972), 553. Marsh was the official reporter of the Nevada legislative sessions for the *Sacramento Daily Union* newspaper.

<sup>57</sup> For a detailed discussion of territorial and state anti-black legislation in Nevada, see Rusco, “*Good Time Coming?*,” especially 21-38.

months to get the black person out of Oregon or pay a \$1,000 fine. The law was repealed in 1845, before it went into effect.<sup>58</sup>

In 1846, Oregon became an official possession of the United States; its territorial legislature was organized in 1849. In September of that year, the legislature passed a bill that required black and mulatto newcomers to leave the territory within 40 days, but that exempted African Americans already in residence. This law remained in effect until it was replaced by the 1859 Oregon constitution, which banned black migration into the state and prohibited blacks from voting. The black exclusion stipulation was not removed from the state constitution until 1926, and the outdated clause banning black suffrage was removed the following year. Oregon's 1850 Homestead Act, in addition, excluded blacks from claiming free land from the government.<sup>59</sup>

California entered the Union as a free state in 1850 by way of the Compromise of 1850, which barred slavery there but established a stronger national fugitive slave law. Unlike the weakly enforced Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, the 1850 federal law was harsher and more comprehensive. It required all U.S. marshals, their deputies, and even ordinary citizens to help arrest suspected runaways. Those refusing to comply with the law could be fined or imprisoned. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it virtually impossible for African Americans to prove that they were free, but slave owners or their agents merely had to provide legal documentation from their home state or have a white witness testify to a federal commissioner that the captured black person was a slave. Federal commissioners were paid \$10 for every captive returned to slavery

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<sup>58</sup> US Slave, "Oregon Black Exclusion Laws," <http://usslave.blogspot.com/2011/04/oregon-black-exclusion-laws.html> [accessed August 29, 2011]; State of Oregon, "Oregon Racial Laws and Events, 1844-1959," <http://www.ode.state.or.us/opportunities/grants/saelp/orraciallaws.pdf> [accessed August 29, 2011].

<sup>59</sup> Quintard Taylor, "Freedmen and Slaves in Oregon Territory, 1840-1860," in *Peoples of Color in the American West*, ed. Sucheng Chan, Douglas Henry Daniels, Mario T. Garcia, and Terry P. Wilson (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1994), 77-79.

and only \$5 for those declared free. In 1852, some 300 black slaves, illegally held by white owners, labored in California's goldfields, and an undetermined number worked as domestic servants.<sup>60</sup> The free state of California had, by far, the largest number of "bond servants west of Texas."<sup>61</sup> As in other states, California's state legislators also established a bulwark of black laws that severely restricted free blacks and left them vulnerable to exploitation. Denied citizenship, blacks could not legally settle on public land. In addition, they were barred from voting, holding public office, serving on juries, attending public schools, and using public transportation. In 1852, state lawmakers passed a bill that prohibited blacks from testifying in court against whites.<sup>62</sup> Despite its free status, California had its own fugitive slave law. California's Fugitive Slave Act of 1852 denied the freedom claims of slaves who were brought into the state by Southern whites. It required that recaptured black fugitives be returned to their owners, and imposed a \$500 fine and a prison sentence on any white person who helped a former slave escape arrest. The law was effective for one year but was extended in 1853 and again in 1854.<sup>63</sup>

In 1858, the fugitive slave case of Archy Lee galvanized the African American community in California, revealed how deeply entrenched anti-black sentiment was in the West, and highlighted the uncertain conditions under which black Americans lived. (see Appendix, Chapter 1, Photo 2). Archy Lee, an 18-year-old Mississippi slave born in 1840, traveled to

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<sup>60</sup> Hine, et al., *The African American Odyssey*, 141, 238-244.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 78.

<sup>62</sup> Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, "We Feel the Want of Protection: The Politics of Law and Race in California, 1848-1878," in *Taming the Elephant: Politics, Government, and Law in Pioneer California*, ed. John F. Burns and Richard J. Orsi (Berkeley: University of California Press with the California Historical Society, 2003), 108-109. For a detailed account of California's black laws, also see Eugene Berwanger, "The Black Law Question in Ante-Bellum California," *Journal of the West* 6, no. 2 (April 1967): 205-220.

<sup>63</sup> Moore, "We Feel the Want of Protection," 109. Katz notes that in California, slavery had "powerful defenders" who by 1852 had "convinced the legislature to pass a broad and arbitrary fugitive slave law" that permitted slave owners to remain in the state for an indefinite time, thus institutionalizing slavery despite its being outlawed in the state constitution. See Katz, *The Black West*, 134; Berwanger, "The Black Law Question in Ante-Bellum California," 214.

California overland in 1857 with his owner, Charles Stovall, from Carroll County, Mississippi. Stovall, whose family owned a plantation, claimed he went west “for the benefit of his health,” and never intended to make California his permanent home.<sup>64</sup> However, the circumstances under which Stovall and Lee began their trip across the plains together are unclear. The most plausible explanation comes from an 1858 interview with Lee, published in the *Alta California* newspaper. In this account, Lee said that he had stabbed a white man who had tried to kidnap him as he labored at Stovall’s mill in Choctaw County, Mississippi. Lee stated that after stabbing the white man, he went into hiding near the mill until Charles Stovall “appeared with a buggy and took him and drove away with him.”<sup>65</sup>

The two men ferried across the Mississippi River at Memphis and made their way to the plantation of John Carnes in Cape Girardeau County, Missouri. Stovall left Lee there for several months. In court documents, Lee claimed that Stovall’s brother William took him from Missouri to Kansas, and then on to the “crossing of the Platte,” where they met up with Charles, who was traveling in a Missouri train bound for California. Lee and the Stovalls continued with the train, with Lee driving the ox-team and cooking for the party.<sup>66</sup> When they reached Carson Valley, on Nevada’s western border, the exhausted oxen were unable to cross the Sierra. Stovall purchased

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<sup>64</sup> Rudolph M. Lapp, *Archy Lee: A California Fugitive Slave Case* (1969; repr., Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2008). This is the best, most detailed account of the Archy Lee case. For this quote, see “Affidavit of C.A. Stovall,” filed March 29, 1858, in BACM Research, “African-American Slavery: California Fugitive Slave Case: Stovall v. Archy Lee Legal Papers,” <http://www.paperlessarchives.com/FreeTitles/StovallvArchy.pdf> [accessed May 5, 2011].

<sup>65</sup> The newspaper interview is reprinted in Lapp, *Archy Lee*, 9, 52-53. For the original newspaper interview, see the *Alta California*, “Archy’s Story,” March 31, 1858. Original of the *Alta California* newspaper is in the California State Library, California Room collection.

<sup>66</sup> For Stovall’s and Lee’s differing versions of events, see “Petition and Affidavit of C. A. Stovall,” January 8, 1858, “Affidavit of C. A. Stovall” filed March 29, 1858, and “Brief for Respondent and Statement of Facts,” April 1858, all in BACM Research, “Archy Lee Legal Papers.” Also see National Archives, “Slavery in California, the Case of *Stovall v. Archy, a Slave*,” especially “Petition and Affidavit of C. A. Stovall,” January 8, 1858 (ARC Identifier 295969), “Brief for Respondent (and Statement of Facts),” ca. April 1858 (ARC Identifier 295967), all in Our Archives: Our Voices. Our History. Our National Archives, an online project of the United States National Archives, <http://www.ourarchives.wikispaces.net/Slavery+in+California+the+Case+of+Stovall+v.+Archy> [accessed May 3, 2011]. Also see Lucile Eaves, *A History of California Labor Legislation: With an Introductory Sketch of the San Francisco Labor Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1910), especially “The Last California Fugitive-Slave Case,” 99-104.

a 160-acre ranch and remained there with Lee for several months. They pushed on to Sacramento, arriving there in October 1857.<sup>67</sup>

Although Stovall testified in court that he had always planned to return immediately to Mississippi upon reaching Sacramento, he opened a private school and taught for a few months. He also hired out Archy Lee for wages, which made up a significant portion of Stovall's income. However, Lee, with the encouragement and support of the free black community in Sacramento, claimed his freedom, citing California's free soil. He ran away and found refuge among Sacramento's free black population but was subsequently arrested. Black and white abolitionists rallied around him, providing legal and financial assistance. Lee was silent during most of his appearances in court, but in January 1858 when Judge Robinson asked him what his wishes were, he clearly replied, "I don't understand what you are speaking of but I want it to come out right. I *don't* want to go back to Mississippi." After a series of complex legal maneuvers, the state Supreme Court held that the state's Fugitive Slave Law applied if the slave owner was only temporarily residing in California. In other words, Lee was considered an escaped slave who was not protected under California law. Despite Stovall's lengthy residency, the court ruled in his favor. However, as Stovall prepared to sail from San Francisco with Lee, abolitionists blockaded the ship. Archy Lee won a reprieve while his supporters fought the extradition order in court. In April 1858, after weeks of intense legal wrangling, Lee was declared free.<sup>68</sup> In the spring of 1858, Lee was among the estimated 400 African Americans (almost 10 percent of the state's black population) who left California for British Columbia when gold was discovered along the

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<sup>67</sup> Lapp, *Archy Lee*, 9, 52-53; *Alta California*, March 31, 1858; BACM Research, "Archy Lee Legal Papers," "Petition and Affidavit of C. A. Stovall," January 8, 1858, "Affidavit of C. A. Stovall" filed March 17, 1858, and "Brief for Respondent and Statement of Facts," April 1858; National Archives, "Slavery in California."

<sup>68</sup> Lapp, *Archy Lee*, 48-62. Archy Lee quote is in Lapp, *Archy Lee*, 8. See also Moore, "We Feel the Want of Protection," 109-111; "Affidavit of C. A. Stovall," filed March 29, 1858, and "Affidavit of S. J. Noble," filed March 29, 1858, in "BACM Research, "Archy Lee Legal Papers"; Eaves, *A History of California Labor Legislation*, 100-104.

Fraser River. By 1862, he was back in the United States, working as a barber in Washoe, Nevada. In 1873, Sacramento newspapers announced his death.<sup>69</sup>

African Americans in California responded to the attacks on their liberty with concerted action. In 1852, they organized the Franchise League and unsuccessfully petitioned the state legislature for full civil rights. Taking a more aggressive approach in 1855, they organized the Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of California. At the first Convention of Colored Citizens, 49 male delegates from 10 of the state's 27 counties met at St. Andrews African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in Sacramento, where they gave their highest priority to overturning the anti-testimony and fugitive slave laws. Subsequent conventions in 1856, 1857, and 1865 targeted voting restrictions, public school segregation, and segregation on public conveyances. A number of convention participants, such as Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, Jeremiah B. Sanderson, and Peter Lester, had been leading abolitionists in their home states before emigrating to California in the early 1850s.<sup>70</sup>

In Colorado, African Americans also fought against black laws that had begun to replace the territory's earlier race-neutral laws. The most egregious of Colorado's black laws, enacted in 1864 by the territorial legislature, limited voting to white males. This law reversed the territory's first election law of 1861, which had given the franchise to all males 21 or older. In addition, the 1861 law had extended the franchise to Indians, who were declared citizens by treaty.<sup>71</sup> Outraged by the erosion of their rights, black Coloradans waged an intense campaign of petitioning and

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<sup>69</sup> Virtually nothing is known about Lee's life in Canada. However, he returned from British Columbia after the outbreak of the Civil War. In 1862 the black-owned *Pacific Appeal* newspaper reported that he was working as a barber in Washoe, Nevada. In 1873, black newspapers and white newspapers in Sacramento reported that Archy Lee had been found buried in the sands along the banks of the American River, seriously ill but refusing help. He was taken to the county hospital in Sacramento, where he died. See Moore, "We Feel the Want of Protection," 11; Lapp, *Archy Lee*, 64.

<sup>70</sup> Moore, "We Feel the Want of Protection," 116-117.

<sup>71</sup> Forbes Parkhill, *Mister Barney Ford: A Portrait in Bistre* (Denver: Sage Books, 1963). For discussion of Colorado's race-neutral laws, see especially 124-125; and Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 124-125.

lobbying territorial and national politicians between 1864 and 1867. This campaign was spearheaded by prominent black Coloradan Barney Ford, a former Virginia slave who had traveled overland from Missouri to Denver in 1860, and Kentucky-born former slave William Jefferson Hardin. Under their leadership, African Americans worked relentlessly to block the territory's admission to statehood without a guarantee of black voting rights. The territorial legislature and the U.S. Congress, for a time, virtually ignored their efforts. However, in January 1867, Congress passed the Territorial Suffrage Act, which regulated voting in the territories and gave all male residents (excluding Indians) the right to vote. As a result, some 800 black male westerners gained suffrage. Thus, for the first time since 1861, black men in Colorado cast their ballots in the 1867 municipal elections held in Denver and Central City.<sup>72</sup>

In Montana, suffrage also became the most pressing concern for blacks when the territory was created in 1864. The organic act that authorized the territory's creation restricted suffrage to white males. After intense debate (most of which centered on Wisconsin Senator James R. Doolittle's contention that no blacks resided in Montana), the Senate and House of Representatives reached a compromise that removed the whites-only voting provision, and instead broadened the franchise to male United States citizens. However, black men still could not vote in Montana because they did not legally have full right of citizenship. Not until the passage of the Territorial Suffrage Act in 1867 and the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in 1868 and 1870, respectively, did African American men receive citizenship and the right to vote in federal and territorial elections.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 124-125; Parkhill, *Mr. Barney Ford*, 134-138.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

## Utah: Slaves and Saints

The treatment and status of African American emigrants to Mormon Utah were unique. They lived within a system that was unlike any other in the antebellum West. Historian D. Michael Quinn has written that Utah was the “only western territory where African-American slavery and slave-sales were protected by territorial statute.”<sup>74</sup> Black overlanders who entered the Salt Lake Valley as part of the Mormon exodus to the West came both as free people and as slaves. Many of them were Mormon converts, but all of them were excluded by law and religious doctrine from full participation in society.

At least three slaves, Green Flake, Hark Lay, and Oscar Crosby (who were euphemistically called “servants” by their white Mormon owners), were part of the first contingent of 143 Latter-day Saints in 1847. Green Flake and Hark Lay had converted to Mormonism before they began the journey to Utah, and Oscar Crosby was baptized into the faith two weeks after arriving in July 1847.<sup>75</sup> They represented a fraction of the black men and women who settled in territorial Utah. Historian Newell G. Bringhurst has estimated that between 110 and 119 slaves and free black men and women were brought or freely emigrated to the Great Basin within the first four years of Mormon settlement. The years 1847 to 1850 marked the peak of black emigration to the region.<sup>76</sup> At the close of 1847, 10 African Americans had arrived in the territory with other Mormon groups. By 1848, some 50 black people lived in the Salt Lake

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<sup>74</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 659; Ronald G. Coleman, “Blacks in Utah History: An Unknown Legacy,” Utah History to Go, an online project, [http://historytogo.utah.gov/people/ethnic\\_cultures/the\\_peoples\\_of\\_utah/blacksinutahhistory](http://historytogo.utah.gov/people/ethnic_cultures/the_peoples_of_utah/blacksinutahhistory) [accessed January 2, 2011]; Coleman, “A History of Blacks in Utah, 1825-1910,” 32-36.

<sup>75</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 71; Jack Beller, “Negro Slaves in Utah,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 2 (October 1929): 122-123; Dennis L. Lythgoe, “Negro Slavery in Utah,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 39 (Winter 1977): 41-42; William E. Parrish, “The Mississippi Saints,” *The Historian* 50, no. 4 (August 1988): 492; Coleman, “Blacks in Utah History.”

<sup>76</sup> Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People Within Mormonism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing, 1981), 218, and especially Table 9, “Number of Blacks (Slave and Free) Who Apparently Migrated to Utah during the Period 1847-1850,” 224.



Valley among a general population of 1,700. The federal census of 1850 reported 24 free persons of color in Utah, and 26 slaves. The 1860 census counted 59 African Americans living in Utah Territory—30 free, and 29 slaves. Many, if not most, black arrivals were converts to Mormonism. However, race excluded them from equality. In Utah Territory (as in New Mexico Territory), the popular sovereignty clause of the Compromise of 1850 dictated the context for slavery.<sup>77</sup>

The Mormon position on blacks and slavery was contradictory, but it ultimately reflected prevailing antebellum white racial attitudes and practices, despite the fact that many Mormon leaders (including Vermont-born Brigham Young) had come from regions where strong anti-slavery sentiment existed. In addition, Mormon doctrine condemned all forms of human bondage, and some Mormon leaders were vocal in their opposition to slavery. Mormon newspapers condemned the “slaveholder who deprives his fellow-beings of liberty,” and proclaimed that the institution of slavery had turned the United States into “an asylum for the oppressed.” Some accounts claim that in 1836 in Kirtland, Ohio, church founder Joseph Smith had personally ordained Elijah Abel, a former slave and Mormon convert, into the Mormon

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<sup>77</sup> For black population in Utah, see Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 72; U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States,” Table 59, Utah –Race and Hispanic Origin: 1850 to 1990, online project of the Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C., Working Paper Series, No. 56, September 2002, <http://www.census.gov/population/wwwdocumentation/twps0056/twps0056.html> [accessed May 19, 2011]; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States*, 1850 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 993. See also 1860 Census; and Coleman, “Blacks in Utah History.” For a discussion of Mormon persecution, anti-Mormon violence, and general nineteenth-century perceptions of Mormons, see Will Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous: Blazing the Trails to Oregon and California, 1812-1848* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 291-293, 370-372; Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 82-141, and *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 241-261. For the Mormon position on African Americans and slavery, see Newell G. Bringham, “The Mormons and Slavery: A Closer Look,” *Pacific Historical Review* 50, no. 3 (August, 1981): 337-338; Bringham, *Saints, Slaves and Blacks*; Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extension of Power*, 286-287; Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue* 8 (1973): 11-68; Ronald G. Coleman, “‘Is There No Blessing for Me?’: Jane Elizabeth Manning James, a Mormon African American Woman,” Taylor and Moore, *African American Women Confront the West*, 144-162; James B. Christensen, “Negro Slavery in the Utah Territory” 18 (Third Quarter 1957): 298-305, especially 299 for black population; and Nathaniel R. Ricks, “A Peculiar Place for the Peculiar Institution: Slavery and Sovereignty in Early Territorial Utah,” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2007), especially 18-49, 99-124.

priesthood.<sup>78</sup> In his 1844 campaign for the presidency, Smith's published platform, *Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States*, denounced the peculiar institution, and called for the "break down [of] slavery" and the destruction of the "shackles from the poor black man." His opposition to slavery did not advocate black equality, however; instead he proposed that the 3.2 million slaves be emancipated and then relocated to Texas, which was at that time part of Mexico, or to Canada.<sup>79</sup>

Mormon opposition to slavery reached a peak in the 1840s after the Latter-day Saints were expelled from Missouri and had established their new headquarters in Nauvoo, Illinois. However, as early as the 1830s, when anti-Mormonism was becoming more widespread and violent, Mormon leaders had begun to temper their religious opposition to slavery, hoping (in part) to avoid incurring persecution from anti-abolitionist forces. Therefore, in 1835, church membership approved an anti-abolition resolution that declared:

We believe it just to preach the gospel to the nations of the earth and warn the righteous to save themselves from the corruption of the world; but we do not believe it right to interfere with bond servants, neither preach the gospel to nor baptize them, contrary to the will and wish of their masters, nor to meddle with or influence them in the least to be dissatisfied with their situations in this life thereby jeopardizing the lives of men. Such interference we believe

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<sup>78</sup> *Nauvoo Neighbor*, September 10, 1845, and *Latter Day Saints Millennial Star* (published in Liverpool, England), September 1843, both quoted in Bringhurst, "The Mormons and Slavery," 332; Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 37-39; Newell Bringhurst, "'The Missouri Thesis' Revisited: Early Mormonism, Slavery, and the Status of Black People," in *Black and Mormon*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 2006), 13-33; Margaret Blair Young, "Abel, Elijah (1810-1884)," *The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/abel-elijah-1810-1884> [accessed July 7, 2011].

<sup>79</sup> Joseph Smith, Jr., *General Smith's Views on the Government and Policies of the United States* (Nauvoo: John Taylor, 1844), online at the Joseph Smith Home Page, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, from the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at Brigham Young University, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=NCMP1820-1846&CISOPTR=2836> [accessed May 10, 2011]. See also Bringhurst, "The Mormons and Slavery," 3, 332; Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 119; Timothy L. Wood: "The Prophet and the Presidency: Mormonism and Politics in Joseph Smith's 1844 Presidential Campaign," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 93, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 167-193, especially 180-182; and Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine," especially 13-22.

to be unlawful and dangerous to the peace of every government allowing human beings to be held in servitude.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, Mormons adopted the position of opposing slavery while rejecting its immediate abolition. When Brigham Young ascended to church leadership after Smith's murder, his "attitude toward African-Americans differ[ed] from the founding prophet's."<sup>81</sup> Young found justification in church doctrine for slavery and black subordination. In an 1852 speech before the Joint Session of the Legislative Assembly in Utah, he declared that church teachings held that blacks were descended from "Ham and Canaan" and were in league with Cain and the devil. Their lineage, therefore, condemned African Americans to be the "servant of servants." In another speech, he proclaimed that the "seed of Canaan . . . will inevitably carry the curse which was placed upon them until the same authority, which placed it there, shall see proper to have it removed."<sup>82</sup>

After Utah Territory was officially established as a result of the Compromise of 1850, Young, who claimed to own no slaves, nevertheless welcomed slaveholding Mormons into Utah. Speaking before territorial lawmakers in 1852, he made his position on the issue clear, declaring, "I am a firm believer in slavery." He also maintained that if "a master has a Negro, and uses him

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<sup>80</sup> The text was originally published in the *Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate*, August 1835; Timothy L. Wood: "The Prophet and the Presidency," 180-181; Bringhurst, "The Mormons and Slavery," 331.

<sup>81</sup> Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 286-287, quote on 659.

<sup>82</sup> For Young's position on slavery and the inferior position of blacks, see "Speech by Governor Young in Joint Session of the Legislature, giving counsel on a Bill in relation to African Slavery, given at Salt Lake City on Friday, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1852, (Reported by George D. Watt; BPP, HDC)," in *The Teachings of President Brigham Young*, vol. 3, 1852-1854, ed. Fred C. Collier (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing Company, 1987), 26, 27 (hereafter cited as Collier, "Governor Young's Speech, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1852"); Collier, *The Teachings of President Brigham Young*, "Governor Young's Speech, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852," (hereafter cited as Collier, "Governor Young's Speech, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852"); Collier, "Governor Young's Speech, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852" 44, 45; "The Message of Governor Brigham Young, delivered to the Council, and House of Representatives of the Legislature of Utah Territory, at Salt Lake City, on Monday, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852, (Reported and prepared for delivery by Thomas Bullock and Thomas W. Ellerbeck; DN, vol. 2:18-#5, 1/10/52)," 16. See also Brigham Young interview by Horace Greeley, July 13, 1859, reprinted in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, August 15, 1993, [http://www.utlm.org/onlineresources/sermons\\_talks\\_interviews/brighamgreeleyinterview\\_july131859.htm](http://www.utlm.org/onlineresources/sermons_talks_interviews/brighamgreeleyinterview_july131859.htm) [accessed May 12, 2011]; Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine," 22-27; and Bringhurst, "Mormons and Slavery," 336.

well, he is much better off than if he was free.”<sup>83</sup> He further observed that “the Negro in the Southern states are much better treated than the laboring classes of England.” In 1852, Young urged the legislature to adopt “An Act in Relation to Service” which legally recognized the enslavement of black people in the Great Basin.<sup>84</sup> He saw the Act as a way to appease wealthy and politically connected Utah slave owners, to reach out to slaveholding Southern Mormons, to curry favor with proslavery representatives in Congress, and to limit the importation of slaves into Utah.<sup>85</sup> The 1852 Act elaborated Mormon views of slavery, portraying black bondage not as chattel slavery but as indentured servitude. It cast Utah’s Mormon slaveholders in the role of benevolent masters who were urged to use their black servants with “all the heart and feelings, as they would use their own children.”<sup>86</sup>

The Act also laid out Utah’s slave code, which, unlike Southern slave codes, placed more emphasis on the regulation of slave owners than on their chattel property. Utah’s slave code prevented slave owners from selling their slaves out of the Territory without the consent of the slaves. It forbade slaveholders from engaging in “sexual intercourse with any of the African race” under penalty of fines ranging from \$500 to \$5,000. It required owners to furnish slaves

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<sup>83</sup> For accounts of the creation of Utah, see Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 370-372, and Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, 236-240. Young was virulently anti-black. Citing theological reasons, Young opposed intermarriage between blacks and whites even within the Mormon faith, but condoned intermarriage between Mormon men and Indian women. For example, when informed that a black Mormon man had married a white Mormon woman in Boston, Young stated that he would have both of them killed “if they were far away from the Gentiles,” instead of in Boston. By contrast, Young urged Mormon elders to marry Indian women as part of God’s plan to make Indians “a White and delightsome people” and to “learn them the [Mormon] gospel.” Young’s statement about the marriage of a black Mormon man and a white Mormon woman is quoted in Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 478. For Young’s comment about Mormon elders and Indian women intermarrying, see Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, vol. 3 (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 241, as quoted in David L. Bigler and Will Bagley, *The Mormon Rebellion: America’s First Civil War, 1857-1858* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 29. For the quotes regarding Young’s support of slavery, see Collier, “Governor Young’s Speech, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1852,” 26-28.

<sup>84</sup> “Collier, “Governor Young’s Speech, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852,” 218.

<sup>85</sup> For a succinct summary of the Act see Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*,” 73-74. For a more detailed account of the Act, see Bringham, “Mormons and Slavery,” 332-338.

<sup>86</sup> For Young’s views on slavery, see Collier, “Governor Young’s Speech, February 5, 1852,” 45. See also Bringham, “Mormons and Slavery,” 336, and Dennis L. Lythgoe, “Negro Slavery in Utah,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 39 (Winter 1971): 52.

with sufficient food, shelter, clothing, and recreational opportunities. It called for owners to provide schooling for slaves between the ages of “six and twenty years” for “not less than eighteen months.” In addition, the Act required Utah slaveholders to prove that their human property had come into the Territory “of their own free will and choice.”<sup>87</sup>

Despite its benevolent veneer, the Act was a culmination of anti-black sentiments that had begun to emerge before the Mormon pilgrimage to the Great Salt Lake Basin. In Nauvoo, Mormon leaders had begun to restrict African Americans’ political and civil rights by legally preventing them from voting, holding municipal office, marrying whites, and joining the militia. These racist trends intensified in the wake of Joseph Smith’s murder and western emigration.<sup>88</sup> By early 1852, Utah blacks, enslaved and free, were banned by the territorial legislature (and by municipal officials in later Great Basin settlements) from voting, holding public office, and belonging to the territorial militia. These anti-black proscriptions were also written into the constitution of the proposed Mormon state of Deseret in 1856, 1860, and 1862.<sup>89</sup>

### **No Rights to be Respected**

The landmark *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 left no doubt about the precarious situation in which nineteenth-century African Americans lived. This ruling increased the vulnerability of all blacks, regardless of residency or region, to enslavement or re-enslavement.<sup>90</sup> Dred Scott was a Virginia-born slave owned by John Emerson, an army doctor living in Missouri. Emerson took Scott along when he was transferred to posts in the free state of Illinois and the free territory of

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<sup>87</sup> Original quotes from “An Act in Relation to Service,” in *Acts, Resolutions, and Memorials of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Utah* (Salt Lake City, 1855), 160-162, quoted in Bringhurst, “Mormons and Slavery,” 335. See also Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 73-74.

<sup>88</sup> Bringhurst, “Mormons and Slavery,” 336-337.

<sup>89</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 73; Bringhurst, “Mormons and Slavery,” 337; Lythgoe, “Negro Slavery in Utah,” 51-54; Ricks, “A Peculiar Place for the Peculiar Institution,” 121-130; Coleman, “Blacks in Utah History.”

<sup>90</sup> For an account of a free-born, Northern African American who was kidnapped and enslaved, see Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (1853; repr., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979). For vulnerability of escaped slaves in the north, see Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (Cambridge: Basic Civitas, 2004), especially 41, 49, and 109-111.

Wisconsin in the 1830s. While on free soil in 1836 or 1837, Scott married Harriet Robinson, a teen-age slave owned by Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent for Wisconsin Territory. (see Appendix, Chapter 1, Photo 3). In October of 1837, Emerson left Fort Snelling for an assignment in Saint Louis, leaving Dred and Harriet in Wisconsin to be hired out. Emerson was subsequently posted to Louisiana, where he married Eliza Irene Sanford in February 1838. The Emersons demanded that Dred and Harriet Scott join them in Louisiana, and the black couple voluntarily traveled back to the slave state. In September 1838, the Emersons and the Scotts stopped in St. Louis and then moved on to Fort Snelling. While en route, Harriet gave birth to the couple's first child, Eliza, in October 1838. Next, Emerson was transferred to Florida in May 1840, leaving his wife and his slaves in St. Louis with his father-in-law, Alexander Sanford, who hired out Dred and Harriet. In 1842, Emerson returned to St. Louis and moved to Davenport, Iowa, with his wife, but left his slaves in Missouri.<sup>91</sup>

Emerson died unexpectedly in December 1843, and three years after his death, Dred and Harriet Scott, with the support of white friends and attorneys, filed separate law suits in Missouri courts for their freedom. They argued that because they had resided where slavery was illegal, they had become forever free. They had a strong case under long-standing Missouri legal precedence that held "once free, always free" in adjudicating freedom suits. Harriet Scott's suit was set aside pending the outcome of her husband's claim.<sup>92</sup> Scott lost his first suit, won his second, and lost again on appeal in the Missouri Supreme Court and again in the U.S. Circuit Court. In the final appeal, *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, the United States Supreme Court, with chief

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<sup>91</sup> Missouri State Archives, "Missouri's Dred Scott Case, 1846-1857," the Missouri Digital Heritage Collections, African American History Initiative, <http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/africanamerican/scott/scott.asp> [accessed May 19, 2011].

<sup>92</sup> Missouri law held that slaves who were taken to free states or territories were freed, even if they returned to the slave state of Missouri. Missouri's judicial standard maintained that once the bonds of slavery had been broken, they did not reattach. See Missouri State Archives, "Missouri's Dred Scott Case."

justice Roger B. Taney of Maryland writing for the majority (who were predominantly Southerners), ruled that black people “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his [the white man’s] benefit.” The 1857 decision held that Scott was not a free man even though he had lived in areas where slavery was illegal. The court also maintained that Scott and all slaves were property, and that Congress could not pass legislation (including the Missouri Compromise or the Kansas-Nebraska Act) that would prevent slave owners from taking their human property into any territory.<sup>93</sup>

After the ruling, the Scotts’ new owner, Dr. Calvin Chaffee, a Massachusetts abolitionist and member of Congress who married John Emerson’s widow, Irene, eventually freed Dred and Harriet. The couple later settled in St. Louis, Missouri, where Harriet worked as a laundress and Dred was employed as a porter at the Barnum Hotel. In 1858, less than 16 months after gaining his freedom, Dred Scott died of tuberculosis. In 1876, Harriet died in St. Louis, where she had resided since her husband’s death with her daughter and son-in-law, Lizzie Scott Madison and Wilson Madison.<sup>94</sup>

The *Dred Scott* ruling became the most important legal decision on the issues of slavery, freedom, and race in antebellum America. It legally stripped African Americans of their personhood and legitimated the practices of slave-catchers who scoured the country for runaways or any black person they might encounter. Moreover, the ruling further entrenched the institution

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<sup>93</sup> For Taney’s opinion, see Taney, Opinion of the Court, U.S. Supreme Court, *Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393, Cornell University Law School, Legal Information Institute, [http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC\\_CR\\_0060\\_0393\\_ZO.html](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0060_0393_ZO.html) [accessed May 20, 2011]; U.S. Supreme Court, *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, 60, U.S. 393 (December Term 1856), Westlaw, <http://laws.findlaw.com/us/60/393.html> [accessed May 19, 2011].

<sup>94</sup> Missouri State Archives, “Missouri’s Dred Scott Case.”

of slavery in the nation's economic and social life, outraging abolitionists and heartening pro-slavery forces.<sup>95</sup>

Many African Americans, enslaved and free, undertook their overland journeys within this harsh political and social milieu. The racial laws and customs of nineteenth-century America informed their every step across the plains.

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<sup>95</sup> For an examination of the Dred Scott case and its legal, social, cultural, and political implications, see David Thomas Konig, Paul Finkelman, and Christopher Alan Bracey, eds., *The Dred Scott Case: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Race and Law* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010). For a comprehensive examination of the Dred Scott decision, see Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).



## CHAPTER 2

### THE JUMPING-OFF PLACES

#### Getting to the Jumping-Off Places

Thousands of hopeful travelers, black and white, poured into towns and outposts along the Missouri River during the mid-nineteenth century to prepare to “jump off” onto the overland trails. From these places, travelers would cross the Missouri River and begin their long overland trek. Historian Merrill J. Mattes defined the jumping-off places as the “Missouri River border towns” which served as trailheads for the “feeder lines” that converged onto the Great Platte River Road. (see Appendix, Chapter 2, Map 1). They were the spots where people outfitted for the overland trip before “jumping off” into the lawless (at least initially) “Indian Territory” west of the Missouri River.<sup>96</sup> However, for many the overland journey began long before they got to the jumping-off places or set foot on the Oregon, California, or Mormon trails. Like their white counterparts, African Americans, free and enslaved, traveled from the East, the deep South, and the Midwest to get to the jumping-off towns.

In January 1847, a group of enslaved black overlanders began making their way to the West as part of the Mormon exodus to Utah. The four men, Oscar Crosby, 32, Hark Lay 22, Henry Brown, age unknown, and an unnamed man owned by Mississippi Mormon John H. Bankhead, were part of an advance team for a brigade of Mormons known as the “Mississippi Saints” who were leaving the South for Utah.<sup>97</sup> The advance team left Mississippi on January 10, 1847. The initial party of two wagons included the “four colored servants” and David Powell

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<sup>96</sup> Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 103.

<sup>97</sup> Coleman, “A History of Blacks in Utah, 1825-1910,” 30-33; Parrish, “The Mississippi Saints,” 490-499; Beller, “Negro Slaves in Utah,” 122-124; Lythgoe, “Negro Slavery in Utah,” 40-42. See also Miriam B. Murphy, “Those Pioneering African Americans,” in *Utah History to Go*, [http://historytogo.utah.gov/utah\\_chapters/pioneers\\_and\\_cowboys/thosepioneeringafricanamericans](http://historytogo.utah.gov/utah_chapters/pioneers_and_cowboys/thosepioneeringafricanamericans) [accessed March 24, 2011].

(brother of Mormon pioneer John Powell), Daniel M. Thomas and family (who brought their two slaves, Phileman and Tennessee), and Charles Crimson. John Brown, a white Mormon convert, was directed by Brigham Young to shepherd the group to Winter Quarters, Nebraska, where they would rendezvous with other Mormons awaiting departure to the West.<sup>98</sup>

The thousand-mile journey to the Mormon trailhead in Nebraska took them across Mississippi and through Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri. The trip took a heavy toll on the entire party, as severe storms, freezing temperatures, and exhaustion plagued the emigrants. John Brown wrote in his journal, “As we traveled northward the weather became extremely cold. At St. Louis, where we were joined by Joseph Stratton and his family, we purchased more teams and wagons. A few days later Bryant Nowlin and Matthew Ivory overtook us, and we now had six wagons. But the mud was so heavy that we had to lay over several days.” Brown added that the temperature turned bitterly cold, “giving us the severest kind of weather, which was extremely hard on the Negroes.” He declared that “this journey from Mississippi was the hardest and severest trip I had ever undertaken.” However, he also noted that “the negroes suffered most.”<sup>99</sup>

John Brown’s journal does not indicate why the African Americans in the party were hardest hit by the inclement conditions. Certainly, everyone, regardless of race, engaged in the hard work needed to accomplish the journey and felt the effects of the harsh conditions. However, slaves, whether they labored on southern plantations or on their journey across the plains, typically shouldered the most taxing and dangerous duties. Nearly everyone, regardless of

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<sup>98</sup> Coleman, “A History of Blacks in Utah, 1825-1910,” 32-33; Parrish, “The Mississippi Saints,” 493-498; Lythgoe, “Negro Slavery in Utah,” 40-43; Beller, “Negro Slaves in Utah,” 122; John Brown, *Autobiography of Pioneer John Brown, 1820-1896*, ed. John Zimmerman Brown (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Walls, Inc., 1941), 72.

<sup>99</sup> Brown, *Autobiography of Pioneer John Brown*, 72. See also Kate B. Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer* (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1965), 7-8; Parrish, “The Mississippi Saints,” 499; Beller, “Negro Slaves in Utah,” 123; Lythgoe, “Negro Slavery in Utah,” 43-44.

race, walked, but unlike white travelers, slaves rarely were permitted to ride in the wagons. While trudging endless miles on foot, slaves also were required by their owners to carry additional supplies.<sup>100</sup> Slaves routinely cleared trails, rescued animals from icy rivers, rounded up stray livestock, and extracted wagons and animals that had become mired in the mud. Whites performed these tasks too, but slaves were on call 24 hours a day and were forced to do their masters' bidding under all conditions, without any choice in the matter. They often worked without sufficient food, water, clothing, shelter, or rest. There is nothing to suggest that the experiences of the "four colored servants" in the Mormon party, who seemed to have had nothing to protect them from the cold, were any different.

Slaves in the antebellum South were particularly susceptible to pneumonia, influenza, and other respiratory ailments. Historian Eugene Genovese notes that pneumonia was a "steady slave killer" after 1845 throughout the South. Genovese states that by 1850, "planters more or less assumed that their slaves would be troubled regularly by pneumonia and related diseases."<sup>101</sup> Winter and spring months were the worst time for slaves who were "much exposed to the inclemencies of the weather."<sup>102</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that two of the six slaves who embarked on the mid-winter overland trip from Mississippi to Nebraska succumbed to lobar pneumonia, an illness known in the antebellum period as "winter fever." Brown recorded in his journal that his slave Henry Brown "took cold and finally the winter fever set in which caused his death on the road." John Brown buried Henry Brown in Andrew County "at the lower end of the round Prairie, eight miles north of Savannah, Missouri." By the time the party reached

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<sup>100</sup> For an 1849 account of an overland slave carrying additional supplies at the behest of her owners, see the journal of Joseph Alonzo Stuart, "Notes on a trip to California," 14-16, WA MSS S-619, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Library, Yale University. Also described in Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 30.

<sup>101</sup> For a discussion of slave health and susceptibility to diseases, see Eugene D. Genovese, "The Medical and Insurance Costs of Slaveholding in the Cotton Belt," *The Journal of Negro History* 45, no. 3 (July 1960): 141-155, especially 150-151 for the quotes.

<sup>102</sup> This statement is from the Medical Society of the State of North Carolina, *Transactions at the Third Annual Meeting*, May, 1852, 77, as quoted in Genovese, "The Medical and Insurance Costs of Slaveholding," 150.

Council Bluffs, the black man owned by John H. Bankhead likewise had died of winter fever. Brown does not mention the location of the nameless slave's burial place.<sup>103</sup>

### **First Impressions**

By the early 1840s, the Missouri River was the boundary between the settled United States and the Western frontier. Some emigrants traveled directly overland from their old homes in the East, the Upper Midwest, and the South to the Missouri River jumping-off places. Many others boarded riverboats or traveled overland to St. Louis, at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers (The sights and sounds of that busy multi-cultural city, especially shocking scenes witnessed at the slave markets, are described in numerous emigrant journals.) From St. Louis, travelers continued by steamer up the Missouri to Independence, Kansas City, and points north, where their real adventure would begin.<sup>104</sup>

Many overlanders stopped temporarily in Independence, Westport (present-day Kansas City, Missouri), St. Joseph, and Council Bluffs, bustling Missouri River towns where they could obtain the items they needed for the long trek. Most emigrants were fascinated, overwhelmed, and frequently appalled by the sky-high prices, teeming crowds, incessant cacophony, and raucous environment they encountered in these places.<sup>105</sup>

A new arrival in Missouri observed that St. Joseph contained "some two thousand five hundred inhabitants and at present is a very busy place on account of the California emigrations which seems to center here . . . [The] place contains four good sized Hotels, about twenty stores

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<sup>103</sup> Coleman notes that when Brown's party arrived at Winter Quarters, at least six or seven other African Americans were already there. These included Isaac and Jane Manning James and their sons, Sylvester and Silas, a free black family who had converted to Mormonism; and two slaves, Elizabeth (Lizzie) Flake and Green Flake (no relation), who were owned by James and Agnes Flake. See Coleman, "A History of Blacks in Utah, 1825-1910," 31-35. See also Brown, *Autobiography of Pioneer*, 72; Parrish, "The Mississippi Saints," 499-500; and Lythgoe, "Negro Slavery in Utah," 43-44.

<sup>104</sup> Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 104.

<sup>105</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the jumping-off towns, see Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 111-117; Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 103-135; and Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 171-176.

and the residue is made up of groceries, bakeries, & C.”<sup>106</sup> Emigrants, often carrying their life savings, became prey for the thieves, gamblers, and desperadoes who swarmed the jumping-off towns. Overland diarist Lucius Fairchild decried the presence in St. Joseph of “thieves enough to steal a man blind.”<sup>107</sup>

While waiting to jump off for California in Kaneshville, Iowa (near Council Bluffs), in April 1850, at least one black overlander fell victim to such thieves as he was preparing to join a California-bound company. The unnamed black man, identified only as being from Wisconsin, suffered a severe setback to his emigration plans when two white men he had hired to work for him on the journey stole his teams and outfitting gear. Edward H. N. Patterson, of Oquawka, Illinois, witnessed the incident while waiting to leave Kaneshville with his wagon company. Patterson wrote in his journal that a “gentleman of color from Wisconsin came here [to Kaneshville] last night to join two teams which he had fitted out, well—he found his teams and was very summarily dismissed by his hired white men, one of whom drew a pistol and ordered him to vamose.” The black man left but he “set about devising some plan by which to recover his teams.” Patterson also noted that “in the meantime, taking advantage of the night[,] the gentlemen who were ‘bound for California at the nigger’s expense’ eloped, and are now in Nebraska, where I wish them no harm—but hope the Indians may strip them; their rascality deserves no better fate.”<sup>108</sup> There is no indication whether the black man recovered his property or was able to continue his journey west.

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<sup>106</sup> Emigrant Silas Newcomb in 1850, quoted in The Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, *The Oregon Trail: The Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean* (Washington, D.C.: Oregon Trails Memorial Association, 1939), 49.

<sup>107</sup> Lucius Fairchild to J. C. Fairchild and family, May 5, 1849, quoted in Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 114.

<sup>108</sup> Edward H. N. Patterson, journal entry dated Friday, April 19, 1850. Patterson’s journal entries were published in the *Oquawka Spectator*, Summer and Fall, 1850, in a series titled, “Overland Journal, Impressions by E. H. N. Patterson.” The entire series is located in the *Oquawka Spectator* microfilm holdings of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois. See also University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois Newspaper

In addition to robberies, murders and assaults were commonplace in the towns along the Missouri River. In 1846, emigrant and future historian Francis Parkman wrote that even in relatively small Westport, “whiskey, by the way, circulates more freely . . . than is altogether safe in a place where every man carries a loaded pistol in his pocket.”<sup>109</sup> (see Appendix, Chapter 2, Photo 1). Parkman also noted that in Independence a “multitude of shops had sprung up to furnish emigrants and Santa Fe traders with necessaries for the journey; and there was an incessant hammering and banging from a dozen blacksmiths’ sheds, where the heavy wagons were being repaired, and the horses and oxen shod. The streets were thronged with men, horses and mules.”<sup>110</sup> (see Appendix, Chapter 2, Photo 2). Clearly, the emigrants were the economic life-blood of the jumping-off towns, which fiercely competed with each other to attract the business of westbound travelers.<sup>111</sup>

### **Cosmopolitan Crossroads**

By the time of the great overland emigrations, the jumping-off places had long-established reputations as racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse communities. Men involved in the Upper Missouri and Rocky Mountain fur trade outfitted for their journeys or even established homes or headquarters in some of these towns—for example, Joseph Robidoux at Council Bluffs and St. Joseph; and Independence was a bustling outfitting town for trade on the Santa Fe Trail. These activities attracted an international assortment of hunters, trappers, roustabouts, missionaries, laundresses, cooks, traders, tourists and other adventurers, many of

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Project, *Oquawka Spectator* (Henderson County), oclc no. 11347317, 1848-1908, Record Set Name: Henderson County Quill, Notes: filed under Stronghurst.

<sup>109</sup> Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky Mountain Life*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1877), 8.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, Walker D. Wyman, “The Outfitting Posts,” *Pacific Historical Review* 18, no. 1 (February 1949): 14-23, especially 16-23; “Circular to California Emigrants,” in *The Daily Missouri Republican*, March 27, 1850; “Independence, California Outfits, &c.,” a letter signed by “Justice,” in *The Daily Missouri Republican*, n.d., courtesy of Bill and Annette Curtis, Independence, Missouri.

whom were African American. Over time, this “heterogeneous mix resulted in a separate society of mixed-bloods: children of men of all nationalities and races and their Indian wives.”<sup>112</sup> Their offspring, many of whom were of African descent, became important “bilingual, multicultural buffers in the merger of Indian with non-Indian society.”<sup>113</sup>

The jumping-off towns were cosmopolitan commercial arenas where buyers and sellers conducted their businesses in an international and multicultural setting. Manuel Harmony, a native of Spain who became a partner in the New York City shipping and commission firm of P. Harmony Nephews and Company, engaged in transporting English goods to Independence for freighting via the Santa Fe Trail. Doña Gertrudis “*La Tules*” Barceló, the shrewd New Mexican businesswoman, famed monte dealer, and gambling impresario, invested \$10,000 in the Santa Fe trade in the boom year of 1843. Charles Ilfeld, a German Jewish immigrant to New Mexico, was one of a number of prominent Jewish merchants who operated mercantile stores and engaged in the Santa Fe trade. Similarly, Wyandotte Indian Chief William Walker leased a warehouse in Independence and his tribe also invested in the Santa Fe trade.<sup>114</sup>

In addition to their roles as emigrant provisioning stations, the jumping-off towns also became economic, social, and racial crossroads where blacks and whites, native-born and foreign-born, business people and laborers, Indians and Mexicans, men and women, and

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<sup>112</sup> Betti Vanepps-Taylor, *Forgotten Lives: African Americans in South Dakota* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2008), 32.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. For Vanepps-Taylor’s original source of the quote about bilingual culture, see Herbert T. Hoover, “The Arrival of Capitalism on the Northern Great Plains: Pierre Choteau, Jr., and Company,” in *South Dakota Leaders: From Pierre Choteau, Jr. to Oscar Howe*, ed. Herbert T. Hoover and Larry J. Zimmerman (Vermillion: University of South Dakota Press, 1989), 6-10.

<sup>114</sup> For Manuel Harmony, see Mark L. Gardner and Mark Simmons, eds., *The Mexican War Correspondence of Richard Smith Elliott* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 239, n. 42; U.S. Department of Education, “A Tale of Two Trails: The History of the Oregon Trail,” by Amy Trenkle, Teacher-To-Teacher Workshops, Online Report, National Park Service, 2005, 5. For Doña Gertrudis Barceló, see Richard W. Etulain, *Western Lives: A Biographical History of the American West* (Albuquerque: Center for the Southwest, University of New Mexico, 2005), 74-83; and Sophia Truneh, “The Ilfelds: A Family Story of Jewish Pioneers in New Mexico,” *Southwest Jewish History* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1995), <http://parentseyes.arizona.edu/bloom/sjihilfeld.htm> [accessed May 3, 2011]. For more about Jewish merchants in the Santa Fe trade, also see William Patrick O’Brien, “Olam Katan” (Small World): Jewish Traders on the Santa Fe Trail,” *Journal of the Southwest*, 48, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 211-231.

residents and transients interacted on a routine basis. Oregon emigrant J. Quinn Thornton described Independence in 1848:

Here might be seen the African slave with his shining black face, driving his six horse team of blood-red bays, and swaying from side to side as he sat upon the saddle and listened to the incessant tinkling of the bells . . . some [wagons] driven by Spaniards, some by Americans resembling Indians, some by negroes, and others by persons of all possible crosses between these various races.<sup>115</sup>

### **Doing Well and Doing Good**

African Americans, enslaved and free, were important figures in the jumping-off places as emigrants seeking provisions, as businessmen selling provisions, and as laborers in construction and road building.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, some African Americans who never set foot on the trails nonetheless became key players in the story of black overland emigration. They managed to do well financially by carving out livelihoods from the lucrative emigrant market. In addition, their work often benefitted African American emigrants who were frequently denied access to services by white merchants and outfitters. These black entrepreneurs helped build and sustain the African American communities that had taken root in towns along the Missouri River. The stories of Emily Fisher and Hiram Young expand our understanding of this aspect of black overland emigration.

Emily Fisher, born a slave in Kentucky around 1808, settled in Independence in 1836 when her white owner and father, Adam Fisher, purchased a farm on Jones Road just east of

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<sup>115</sup> J. Quinn Thornton, *Oregon and California in 1848*, quoted in Elizabeth McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise: A History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940* (Portland: The Georgian Press, The Oregon Black History Project, 1980), 14.

<sup>116</sup> Vanepps-Taylor, *Forgotten Lives*, 32. For reference to slaves helping to build towns and roads in Missouri, see William J. Curtis, *A Rich Heritage: A Black History of Independence, Missouri* (Kansas City, Mo.: Better Impressions Publishing, 1985); Ted Stillwell, "Sam Shepherd and the Broadaxe," *The Independence Examiner*, January 3, 2002; Michael Dickey, "George Caleb Bingham's Missouri," *Friends of Arrow Rock, Summer Newsletter*, 2007, <http://www.friendsar.org/binghamsomo2.lhtml> [accessed August 8, 2010]; and The City of Independence Heritage Commission, "Independence Historic Survey," ca. 1976, 11.1-11.



Independence. Emily married a slave named Rowan, who was also owned by Adam Fisher. The couple had two sons, Rowan, Jr., and Shelby, and a daughter named Sarah. In the late 1850s, when Emily was a woman in her early 40s, Adam Fisher manumitted her. He purchased a hotel in Independence, which Emily managed. After Adam Fisher died in 1860, Emily became the owner and manager of the hotel, thus becoming Jackson County's first black businesswoman.<sup>117</sup> (see Appendix, Chapter 2, Photo 3).

Her success rested on her considerable culinary, housekeeping, and business skills. Author Tricia Martineu Wagner writes that Emily Fisher ran the hotel "as she saw fit."<sup>118</sup> This perhaps explains why she opened her establishment to black and white travelers, an unusual situation in the jumping-off centers, where hotels and restaurants vied with each other for white emigrant business but typically refused service to black travelers. Most black overlanders had to rely on their own devices to secure accommodations while they waited to contract with a westbound wagon train. Fisher's hotel, located on the northeast corner of Main and Maple streets, gained a reputation for its outstanding service and clean linens. African American emigrants could now enjoy safe and comfortable accommodations before setting off on the trail.

Fisher's reputation among emigrants of all races was further enhanced when she invented a "healing salve," the recipe for which came to her "one night while [she] was sleeping." She did a booming business selling it to overland travelers but she never revealed the recipe. In addition to these accomplishments, her donation of an initial load of bricks made it possible for the African American community in 1886 to construct the first black church in Independence—the

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<sup>117</sup> William J. Curtis, "Emily Fisher: First Independence Black Business Woman," *Kansas City Genealogist* 36, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 76-77; Tricia Martineu Wagner, *It Happened on the Oregon Trail* (Guilford, Conn.: Morris Book Publishing, 2005), 115-117; Adrienne DeWeese, "Top 10: The People and Places Who Made Up a Rich Black History in Independence," *Independence Examiner*, February 19, 2010; *Encyclopedia of African American Business*, ed. Jessie Carnie Smith, Millicent Lownes Jackson, Linda T. Wynn (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2006), s.v. "Black Business Development in Missouri," 58.

<sup>118</sup> Wagner, *It Happened on the Oregon Trail*, 117.

Second Baptist Church, which is the oldest black church building in the Kansas City area. Unlike her hotel, the church still stands. Emily Fisher was buried in the town's Woodlawn Cemetery in 1887.<sup>119</sup>

Hiram Young, like Emily Fisher, was not an overland traveler, but as historian W. Sherman Savage has noted, he “not only aided the western movement but prospered by it.”<sup>120</sup> Young, a former slave described as a “tall, dark skin colored man,” was born in Tennessee circa 1812. He was taken to Green County, Missouri, by his owner George Young, but purchased his freedom in 1847. He married an enslaved woman named Matilda. He may have bought his wife out of slavery before purchasing his own freedom so that his children, taking the status of their mother, would be recognized as free born, and so that his freed wife would be better able to help him in his business dealings.<sup>121</sup>

Between 1847 and 1850, Hiram and Matilda Young lived in the Missouri town of Liberty, approximately 20 miles east of the Kansas border. Liberty gained the reputation of being the “outfitting center of Independence.”<sup>122</sup> In 1850 Hiram, his wife, and their infant daughter, Amanda, moved to Independence, where he made a living as a carpenter. Young, who could not read or write, had to rely on white businessman William McCoy (who was Independence's first mayor) to act as his business agent. Nonetheless, by 1851 Young had opened a modest

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<sup>119</sup> Ted Stillwell, “Emily Fisher and Her Healing Salve,” unpublished manuscript in the personal collection of Bill and Annette Curtis; *Encyclopedia of African American Business*, “Black Business Development in Missouri” 58; DeWeese, “Top 10: The People and Places Who Made Up a Rich Black History in Independence,” *Independence Examiner*, February 19, 2010. It should be noted that by 1860, however, very few people started their journey west from Independence; instead they headed out from Kansas City or other more westward points.

<sup>120</sup> Savage, “The Negro in the Westward Movement,” 534-535.

<sup>121</sup> Hiram Young was described by James Thomas, a former slave, Missouri businessman, and contemporary of Hiram Young. See James Thomas, *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Thomas*, ed. Loren Schweningen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 99; Mark L. Gardner, *Wagons for the Santa Fe Trade: Wheeled Vehicles and Their Makers, 1822-1880* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 34-35; Bagley, *So Rugged and So Mountainous*, 335; and William P. O'Brien, “Hiram Young: Black Entrepreneur on the Santa Fe Trail,” *Best of Wagon Tracks*, 4, no. 1 (November 1989): 1-4, [http://www.santafetrail.org/the-trail/history/best-of-wagon-tracks/Hiram\\_Young.pdf](http://www.santafetrail.org/the-trail/history/best-of-wagon-tracks/Hiram_Young.pdf) [accessed May 30, 2011].

<sup>122</sup> O'Brien, “Hiram Young,” 1.

establishment on north Liberty Street in Independence to begin the “manufactory of yokes and wagons—principally freight wagons for hauling govt. freight across the plains” and supplying drayage wagons and ox yokes for the Santa Fe Trail trade. His success expanded with the emigrant trails traffic. His company established a virtual monopoly on the ox yoke manufacturing business, turning out approximately 50,000 yokes and 800 to 900 wagons a year.<sup>123</sup>

Overland emigrants made up a significant portion of Young’s business. His newspaper advertisements announced that his company could supply emigrants with wagons, ox yokes, and other provisions “at the shortest notice.”<sup>124</sup> His wagons were equipped to haul 6,000 pounds pulled by six teams of oxen. Young branded each wagon with the initials of the purchaser and proudly emblazoned each wagon with the logo “Hiram Young and Company.” The wagons were so popular with overland emigrants that they became known as “Hiram Young” wagons.<sup>125</sup> (see Appendix, Chapter 2, Photo 4). James Thomas, a contemporary of Hiram Young and himself a businessman and former slave from Tennessee, noted that “Wagons of his [Young’s] make could be seen on the plains from Kansas City to San Francisco.”<sup>126</sup> Many emigrants who outfitted themselves in the jumping-off towns undoubtedly began their journeys in wagons built by Hiram Young, pulled by oxen wearing yokes made by Hiram Young.

Young’s factory and farm also provisioned emigrants with equipment and foodstuff they would need for the trip. His foundry and blacksmith shop in Independence housed seven forges and employed 20 men. His 480-acre farm in the Little Blue Valley, six miles east of

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<sup>123</sup> O’Brien, “Hiram Young,” 1.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas, *From Tennessee Slave to Saint Louis Entrepreneur*, 99.

Independence, employed nearly 60 workers and produced livestock, corn, and wheat.<sup>127</sup> Young's enterprises provided emigrants with the essentials for overland travel. The census of 1860 shows Young's wagon factory to be the largest industry in Independence. It lists him as one of the wealthiest men in Jackson County, with real estate valued at \$36,000 and personal property at \$20,000. He simply described himself as a "colored man of means."<sup>128</sup>

Hiram Young built a thriving business empire and created a solid economic base that served western emigration and at the same time benefitted the African American community. More importantly, his business endeavors provided him the opportunity to aid slaves, giving them a pathway to freedom even in the midst of slavery's stronghold. He employed dozens of workers in his shops regardless of race, and paid them equally. While Young frequently contracted with slave speculators and local slave owners (such as Jabez Smith, the largest slaveholder in Jackson County) to buy slaves to work in his numerous enterprises, this was a means to an end. Ever mindful of what he and his wife had endured as slaves, he did not treat his enslaved employees as human chattel, but rather like paid apprentices.<sup>129</sup> While in his employ, they were paid the "going wage of five dollars a day" and received rigorous training in the trade "so that each one of them would be able to be totally independent when they were free."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> O'Brien, "Hiram Young," 1-2; Thomas, *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur*, 99; Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 335.

<sup>128</sup> O'Brien, "Hiram Young," 1. For original source of "colored man of means," see Affidavit of Hiram Young, 1881; *Estate of Hiram Young, Deceased v. The United States* [No. 7320 Cong.], National Archives.

<sup>129</sup> Annette W. Curtis, *Jackson County, Missouri in Black and White: Jabez Smith, His Slaves, Plantations, Estate and Heirs*, vol. 1 (Independence: Two Trails, 1998), 67-68, 87, 95, 105-106. Many thanks to Bill and Annette Curtis for making Hiram Young's business and probate records available to me. See Hiram Young Business in Jabez Smith Probate, October 17, 1856, voucher no. 41, regarding the slave named Sam hired out to Hiram Young; also January 5, 1856, voucher no. 7, regarding Hiram Young's hiring a of slave named William from the estate of Jabez Smith.

<sup>130</sup> Young was not the first African American in a jumping-off town to employ slaves and give them the opportunity to purchase their freedom. John Berry Meachum, a former slave from Virginia who used his skills as a carpenter and cooper to buy his own freedom, arrived in St. Louis in 1815. After purchasing his wife and children, he opened his own cooperage business in St. Louis, where he employed at least 20 slaves he purchased with the intent of teaching them marketable skills. Once they had repaid most of their purchase price from their earnings, Meachum freed them. See *Encyclopedia of African American Business*, s. v. "Black Business Development in Missouri," 58; "St. Louis Historic Preservation, "Mound City on the Mississippi: A St. Louis History—People, John Berry Meachum," n. d.,

In this way, some of Young's slave employees could obtain the means to purchase their own liberty. Some would become emigrants themselves, perhaps setting out for the West in wagons that they helped build while in the employ of their black benefactor. Therefore Young's businesses, operating within the context of slavery, challenged the foundations and assumptions upon which slavery rested. Independence historian and Hiram Young scholar Bill Curtis notes that this angered many "rank and file" whites who resented Young's status as a free, prosperous black man who aided slaves. James Thomas, another black businessman in Independence and an acquaintance of Young, recalled in his autobiography that "many would have liked to have a finger in his [Young's] business but all such he kept off from."<sup>131</sup>

Young further challenged prevailing racial practice by opening his "well furnished home" to his employees regardless of race when they needed a place to live. Daniel Flanagan was among the many Irish immigrants who were employed in his shops. Flanagan, an apprentice wagon-maker who learned the trade in New York, arrived in Independence in 1847. He went to work in Young's shop shortly after and boarded in the Young household. In the 1970s, historian Bill Curtis interviewed Josephine Flanagan Randall, Daniel Flanagan's granddaughter. She recalled that her grandfather "was especially grateful because Hiram Young . . . brought a white Irishman . . . into his home to be his student." Randall added that Hiram Young "made her grandfather a prosperous merchant."<sup>132</sup>

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[http://stlcn.missouri.org/history/people/detail.cfm?Master\\_ID=1126](http://stlcn.missouri.org/history/people/detail.cfm?Master_ID=1126) [accessed August 5, 2010]. See also *Dictionary of Missouri Biography*, ed. Lawrence O. Christensen, William E. Foley, Gary R. Kremer, and Kenneth H. Winn (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), s.v. "Meachum, John Berry."

<sup>131</sup> O'Brien, "Hiram Young, Black Entrepreneur," 2; William Curtis, telephone conversation with the author, August 29, 2009; Thomas, *From Tennessee Slave to Saint Louis Entrepreneur*, 99.

<sup>132</sup> For 1970s interview with Josephine Flanagan Randall, see Bill Curtis and Annette Curtis, "Searching for the Real Hiram Young," unpublished manuscript, 5-7, in the personal collections of Bill and Annette Curtis, Independence, Missouri; Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, telephone conversation with William Curtis, August 29, 2009; see also "Daniel Flanagan," in *The History of Jackson County, Missouri: Containing a History of the County, Its Cities, Towns, Etc.* (Kansas City, Mo.: Union Historical Company, Birdsall, Williams & Co., 1881), 888.

The Civil War eroded Young's wagon business in Independence and he and his family became short-distance travelers on the overland trail when they fled Independence for the safety of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, during the war. There Young resumed business. In 1868, he returned to Independence "to find that much of his old business was destroyed and the Santa Fe Trail commerce gone." He subsequently opened a planing mill with moderate success. Young, himself illiterate, was a strong supporter of education and in the late 1860s he helped establish Independence's first and only school for African American children. In 1874 he helped raise money to construct the Douglass School building. Hiram Young spent his last years embroiled in a long, unfruitful lawsuit against the federal government, claiming Union troops had destroyed his property. He died without a will in 1882 with his estate in debt, and he, like Emily Fisher, was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery.<sup>133</sup> (see Appendix, Chapter 2, Photo 6.).

### **The Cost of Crossing**

Overlanders who crowded the streets of the Missouri River towns were dismayed by the high cost of outfitting. Emigrant William Rothwell flatly accused merchants of engaging in a "general system of extortion."<sup>134</sup> High prices resulted from the "law" of supply and demand, seasonal fluctuations, and frequent shortages. Therefore, trail staples like flour, bacon, rice, beans, sugar, and coffee commanded top dollar. These non-perishable items could be transported easily and constituted the backbone of the trail diet.<sup>135</sup>

In 1845, guidebook authors like the controversial Lansford W. Hastings advised overland travelers to purchase "at least, two hundred pounds of flour, or meal; one hundred and fifty

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<sup>133</sup> O'Brien, "Hiram Young: Black Entrepreneur," 1-2; Curtis and Curtis, "Searching for the Real Hiram Young," 3.

<sup>134</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 111-117, especially 112 for the quote from William Rothwell's letter to his parents, May 5, 1850. The original is in William Renfro Rothwell, "Journal and Letters, 1850," a typescript archived at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. See also Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 130, 171-173.

<sup>135</sup> National Park Service, *National Historic Trails Auto Tour Route Interpretive Guide: Western Missouri Through Northeastern Kansas*, by Lee Kreutzer (Salt Lake City: National Trails System-Intermountain Region, September 2005), 5.

pounds of bacon; ten pounds of coffee; twenty pounds of sugar; and ten pounds of salt.”<sup>136</sup> Five years later, California-bound emigrant and diarist Adam Mercer Brown wrote in 1850 that in St. Joseph, “the weather was cold and damp. Prices were high, corn and oats running \$1.00 [the 2009 equivalent of \$28.30] per bushel and horses priced between \$40 and \$100 a head” [the 2009 equivalent of \$1,130 and \$2,830 respectively].<sup>137</sup> J. L. Campbell’s 1864 emigrant guidebook directed travelers to purchase 12 sacks of flour, 400 pounds of bacon, 100 pounds of coffee, 50 pounds of salt, 200 pounds of sugar, 50 pounds of rice, and two bushels of beans for a cost of \$270 (the equivalent of \$3,800 in 2009 dollars). When other necessities like wagons, oxen teams, yokes, axles, rope, nails, tents, mining equipment, and cooking utensils were included, total outfitting costs rose to \$570.85 (2009 equivalent of \$8,040).<sup>138</sup>

In addition to staple foods, wagons, oxen, mules, horses, yokes, harnesses, and other equipment represented crucial and potentially unaffordable expenses. In 1846, a yoke of (two) oxen in Independence sold for \$25. By the spring of 1849, the price had climbed to between \$45 and \$65. Prices for mules ranged from \$30 to \$100 a head. These prices could be prohibitive, as a group of Salt Lake City-bound Mormons (most from Liverpool, England) discovered while they preparing to depart from Keokuk, Iowa, in 1853. Church emigration agent Isaac C. Haight, in charge of outfitting the group, underestimated the costs of overland travel. His original calculations of \$60,000 (the modern equivalent of \$1.2 million) fell woefully short, and his attempts to borrow money in St. Louis failed. The company was forced to borrow \$1,000 from a

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<sup>136</sup> Lansford W. Hastings, *The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California: The 1845 Pioneers’ Guide for the Westward Traveler* (1845; repr., Bedford, Mass.: Applewood Books, 1994), 143.

<sup>137</sup> Adam Mercer Brown, “Over Barren Plains and Rock-Bound Mountains,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 22, no. 4 (Autumn 1972): 18.

<sup>138</sup> J. L. Campbell, *Idaho: Six Months in the New Gold Diggings, The Emigrant’s Guide Overland* (Chicago: John R. Walsh, 1864). Microfiche copy in the California State Library, Sacramento, California. See also a reproduction of Campbell’s section on “Provisions and Equipment Recommended,” Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office, The Bridger Trail, <http://wyoshpo.state.wy.us/btrail/images/big/pg/119.jpg> [accessed July 19, 2010].

wealthy Mormon emigrant, and it received additional assistance from the church's Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company before it could depart for Salt Lake City.<sup>139</sup>

Occasionally, African American overlanders served as financial benefactors to cash-strapped whites in the wagon trains. When George W. Bush, a black man, and family left Savannah Landing in Michael Simmons' wagon train headed for the Oregon Country, Bush took with him profits from the sale of his farm and virtually all his possessions. He also carried some \$2,000 in silver coins, which he transported in a "double or false floor" of his covered wagon. The money represented his life savings earned from his prosperous farming and business ventures in Missouri.<sup>140</sup> The Bushes were in better financial condition than many of the white families who traveled in the 84-wagon train. John Minto, a 22-year-old British emigrant who became Bush's friend and confidant during the long trip, wrote in his journal that "it was understood that Bush was assisting at least two of these [Michael Simmons and Gabriel Jones] to get to Oregon." Bush purchased six wagons for the journey, which cost about \$1,000 to outfit

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<sup>139</sup> Dollar equivalencies to today's money varied over the three decades of the overland emigration. The modern-day money equivalencies in this report are approximations. The comparative prices are based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which calculates the cost of things that the average household buys such as food, housing, transportation, medical services, etc. The CPI is the most useful measure when comparing the historical costs of consumer goods and services to those of today. See "Measuring Worth: Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to Present," <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare> [accessed May 30, 2011]. For fluctuating oxen prices, see Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 114. For mule prices, see Wyman, "The Outfitting Posts," 17. For the story of Isaac C. Haight and the Keokuk, Iowa, Mormon party, see William G. Hartley, "LDS Emigration in 1853: The Keokuk Encampment and Outfitting Ten Wagon Trains for Utah," *Mormon Historical Studies* (Fall 2003): 49-51.

<sup>140</sup> George W. Bush has also been called George Washington Bush. His middle name, or lack thereof, sometimes causes him to be confused with George Washington, another African American who crossed the plains in 1850 and founded Centralia, Washington. John Minto traveled with Bush to Oregon Country and referred to him as G. W. Bush in his journal. There is no indication that the middle initial stood for the name Washington. In order to avoid confusion, I have used the name George W. Bush in this report when referring to the African American man who went to Oregon Country in 1844 in the Simmons-Gilliam party. See John Minto, "Reminiscences of Experiences on the Oregon Trail in 1844, II," *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 2, no. 3 (September 1901): 212, 219, 241; Clackamas Heritage Partners, Historic Oregon City Presents: End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, "Black Pioneers and Settlers - George Washington Bush," [http://www.historicoregoncity.org/HOC/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&i](http://www.historicoregoncity.org/HOC/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&i) [accessed December 29, 2008]; and National Park Service, "George Washington Bush and the Human Spirit of Westward Expansion," *The Museum Gazette* (February 1999), [http://www.nps.gov/untold/banners\\_and\\_backgrounds/expansionbanner/gwbush.htm](http://www.nps.gov/untold/banners_and_backgrounds/expansionbanner/gwbush.htm) [accessed July 29, 2010].



them all. The wagons were “carefully and thoughtfully stocked with provisions enough to last a year.” He gave four of the fully loaded wagons to other families in his party who were cash-poor.<sup>141</sup> By the time they reached Fort Bridger (in the modern state of Wyoming), the company, which had split from the larger Gilliam train, was in dire straits. Many had run out of supplies and clothing. Bush’s generosity once again saved the day. He purchased flour “at the wildly inflated price of \$60 a barrel, sugar at \$1 a pound, and calico at \$1 a yard” so that all members of the party were “fed, clothed, and supplied” before they continued.<sup>142</sup>

The overland journey was costly for everyone, but for poor black men and women it was virtually impossible to cover the expenses. In Ohio, Rachel Brown, the wife of a black overlander, cited economic reasons for her refusal to join her Argonaut husband, David, in California. In 1853 she wrote him, “my Dear I don’t think It would be profitable for me to come as I think It would Cost so much & you will be home soon . . . . I have not the money to come with. . . . It will cost so much & mother said I could not go with . . . . [S]he could come a long & she was not able to Do that.”<sup>143</sup> Rachel and David Brown will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5 of this report.

Because of the staggering costs of travel, African Americans who went west by the overland route usually traveled as members of companies organized by whites. Historian

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<sup>141</sup> For the number of wagons in Bush’s party, see Oregon-California Trails Association, *Census of Overland Emigrant Documents*, Document ID #44 MIN01, Minto, “Journey Description,” 2. For Bush assisting others in the party, see Minto, “Reminiscences of Experiences on the Oregon Trail in 1844, Part 2,” 212; and Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 336. See also Katz, *The Black West*, 73-77; Savage, “The Negro in the History of the Pacific Northwest,” 259; “A Negro Pioneer in the West,” *The Advertiser Journal* [Kent, Washington] (December 23, 1920; repr., *The Journal of Negro History* 8, no. 3, July 1923): 334; and Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 82. For Bush providing carefully stocked wagons, see Clackamas Heritage Partners, “Black Pioneers and Settlers - George Washington Bush,” and National Park Service, “George Washington Bush and the Human Spirit.”

<sup>142</sup> National Park Service, “George Washington Bush and the Human Spirit.”

<sup>143</sup> Rachel Brown’s letter is from the exhibition, “I Remain Your Affectionate Wife, Until Death . . . Seven letters written to David Brown, a Colored Man (in Downieville, California) From his wife and mother-in-law Rachel Ann Brown and Sarah Smith (in Lancaster, Fairfield County, Ohio).” See letter “To Mr David Brown from Rachel A Brown,” dated October 14, 1853. The original letters, discovered and collected by John Mark Lambertson, are in the National Frontier Trails Museum in Independence, Missouri. Hereafter cited as “The Brown Letters.” Thanks to John Mark Lambertson for providing me with copies of these remarkable documents.

Rudolph Lapp has speculated that there is “no record of any overland company organized solely by and for blacks” because the money necessary for such an undertaking would have been extremely difficult for black men and women to obtain in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>144</sup>

Almost all black travelers found that overland travel posed some unique obstacles due to prevailing racial attitudes and practices. Slaves, of course, had no choice in the decision or method of overland migration. They traveled with their owners as chattel property who performed much of the work and shared the hazards of the trail. However, free blacks desiring to go west encountered challenges in the jumping-off towns that added to their expenses and their anxieties. Like white emigrants, free blacks sometimes could contract with wagon companies in their home states for a flat fee that would cover their transportation and board. Ohio emigrant David Brown entered into this type of agreement with Sturgeon and Crim’s company when he set out for California in 1852. His contract required him to pay \$150 (equivalent of \$4,300 in 2009), with \$50 (equivalent of \$1,430 in 2009) payable in advance and the balance paid before setting out on the trail sometime “between the first and fifteenth of April next.” Brown’s fee entitled him to transportation and board, but the company owners were “not bound to furnish clothing or to pay doctor’s bills” for him or any of the other travelers.<sup>145</sup> African American overland emigrants could also try to find a westbound company willing to transport them in exchange for labor. If they already resided in or had managed to get to one of the Missouri River towns, they might wait there until they could sign on with a company willing to accept their money or services in exchange for a place in the party.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 25.

<sup>145</sup> Contract for transportation from Lancaster, Ohio, to Marysville, Ohio, Thomas Sturgeon, Samuel Crim, David Brown, February, 1852, in Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 87-88.

<sup>146</sup> For a detailed description of contracts for overland trail transportation, see John Phillip Reid, “Binding the Elephant: Contracts and Legal Obligations on the Overland Trail,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 21, no. 4 (October 1977): 285-315, especially 293-310.

Illinois freeman Henry Finley secured a place in an Ohio wagon company bound for the gold fields of California. Finley's 1849 journey began in Illinois, where he encountered Major John Love's wagon train as it rolled through the state. Offering his services as company cook, Finley was hired on even though most wagon train charters prohibited black members in any capacity.<sup>147</sup> That same year, Harry Withe, a young, unmarried black man, petitioned the organizational meeting of another California-bound wagon company from Hagerstown, Indiana, to sign him on "to accompany them to California as per agreement hereafter to be entered into." The April 1849 company lists identify Withe as "Harry With, coloured boy." His position in the train was listed as "cook."<sup>148</sup>

While white emigrants, too, used these options to secure passage west, black overlanders always faced a racial component that complicated and often delayed their start across the plains. Since many wagon companies had charters that expressly excluded black members, African American emigrants had to invest more time and effort in persuading white companies to transport them. In the spring of 1859, one-time slave Clara Brown found an opportunity for western passage among the white gold-seekers who had recently arrived in Leavenworth. After spending many days down on the levee listening to the newcomers discuss their emigration plans, Brown approached Colonel Wadsworth's party and offered her services in exchange for passage to Colorado. Despite objections from some of the white members of the party, she ultimately convinced them that her value as a cook outweighed their prejudices against traveling with an African American woman of mature years. Clara Brown biographer Roger Baker notes that Brown, a frugal and savvy business woman, might have had the funds to book passage on

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<sup>147</sup> Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 26. For discussion of wagon train charters excluding blacks, see Guenther, "Could These Bones be from a Negro?," 46. For a brief discussion of Major John Love in the Mexican War, see William Henry Perry, J. H. Battle, and Weston Arthur Goodspeed, *The History of Medina County and Ohio* (1881; repr., Evansville, Ind.: Unigraphic, 1972), 132.

<sup>148</sup> Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 27

one of the Concord stagecoaches that regularly made the 687-mile trip from Leavenworth to Denver in a matter of days; but she, like other black travelers, “would not have been welcome as a paying passenger in a public conveyance.” Therefore, signing on as a cook for Colonel Wadsworth’s overland company was “less a matter of economic than of social necessity.”<sup>149</sup> Such prejudices imposed an additional economic burden on black emigrants, who were forced to spend extra money and time waiting in the jumping-off towns for a white company willing to take them on.

### Negotiating the Racial Terrain

Most of the Missouri River outfitting towns were strongholds of slavery that bristled with anti-black sentiment. Slave-hunters routinely patrolled the Missouri border, preying on vulnerable African Americans. Charlie Richardson, a former slave in Warrensburg, Missouri, recalled in a 1930s interview, “I remember some tough men driving like mad through our place many times, with big chains rattling. We called them slave hunters.”<sup>150</sup> Slave dealers and slaveholders paid a bounty ranging from \$25 to \$100 for each captive, and slave-catchers did not hesitate to kidnap a free black person or steal a slave from his owner.<sup>151</sup> All blacks were fair game. Ever vigilant, African Americans had to negotiate the racial terrain of the jumping-off places as carefully as they would plot their way across the plains.

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<sup>149</sup> Kathleen Bruyn, “Aunt” *Clara Brown: Story of a Black Pioneer* (Boulder, Col.: Pruett, 1970), 24-25; Roger Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado* (Central City, Col.: Black Hawk, 2003), 14-15, 21. The Leavenworth & Pikes Peak Express Company began running Concord coaches to Denver in April 1859. Baker notes that Brown’s arrival in Denver on June 6, 1859 suggests her departure date from Leavenworth was sometime in mid-April 1859.

<sup>150</sup> Charlie Richardson, Missouri State Museum, “Slavery’s Echoes: Interviews with Former Missouri Slaves, Quotes from Exhibit Panels, Panel 6: A-Freedom and B-Selling,” [http://www.mostateparks.com/sites/default/files/se\\_panels%5B1%5Dpdf](http://www.mostateparks.com/sites/default/files/se_panels%5B1%5Dpdf) [accessed July 21, 2010].

<sup>151</sup> For slave-catchers patrolling the Missouri border, see James L. Hill, “Migration of Blacks to Iowa, 1820-1960,” *Journal of Negro History* 66, no. 4 (Winter 1981-1982): 291-292. Missouri State Archives, Missouri Digital Heritage, “Missouri’s Early Slave Laws: A History in Documents, Laws Concerning Slavery in Missouri Territorial to 1850s,” <http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/education/aahi/earlyslavelaws/slavelaws.asp> [accessed August 1, 2010].

William Wells Brown spent most of his young adult life as a slave in St. Louis working as a tavern keeper's assistant, factotum for the newspaper office of abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy, and steward on a Mississippi River steamboat. He escaped to freedom on New Year's Day 1834 and went on to become a renowned abolitionist lecturer, writer, and conductor on the Underground Railroad. His 1847 autobiography recorded some of the dangers that befell African Americans in Missouri, observing that "Missouri, though a comparatively new state is very much engaged in raising slaves to supply the southern market."<sup>152</sup> He warned that African Americans risked the "danger of being arrested" by slave hunters who swarmed into Missouri and nearby free states such as Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Kentucky slave Dave Boffman was one who suffered such "arrest."<sup>153</sup>

Dave Boffman was born on the Baughman plantation in Crab Orchard, Lincoln County, Kentucky, circa 1820. He arrived in California in 1851. Like so many other enslaved blacks who were taken west, Boffman (a phonetic spelling of his owner's surname, which he adopted when he purchased his freedom) viewed his trip across the plains as an opportunity to free himself and his loved ones. However, as also was the experience of many other African American emigrants, his overland journey would yield bittersweet rewards.

Boffman's original owner, Henry Baughman, owned one of the largest cotton plantations in central Kentucky and held nearly 100 slaves. In 1837, Dave Boffman married 16-year-old

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<sup>152</sup> William Wells Brown, *The Travels of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave and the American Fugitive in Europe. Sketches of Places and People Abroad* (1847, 1853; repr., ed. Paul Jefferson, New York: Marcus Weiner Publishing, Inc., 1991), <http://books.google.com/books?id=02IVODKxz7KC&pg=PA238&lpg=PA238&dq=William+Wells+Brown+Narrative+of+a+Fugitive+Slave> [accessed July 26, 2011], 57; William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave. Written By Himself* (1847; digital repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 81, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brown47/brown47.html> [accessed August 4, 2010].

<sup>153</sup> Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown*, 95. For slave hunters overrunning free states, see Hill, "Migration of Blacks to Iowa," especially, 290-292. For accounts of the vulnerability of fugitive and free blacks to slave hunters, also see Stanley W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970).

Matilda, a slave on the same plantation. The couple had six children, three boys and three girls.<sup>154</sup> When Henry Baughman died in 1843, Dave, Matilda, and the children were given to Henry's grandson, Newton Baughman. In the summer of 1848, when news of the gold discovery in California reached Kentucky, Newton Baughman caught gold fever and began to make plans to go west with his wife and daughter. The Baughmans left Kentucky that summer and took Dave and his family with them. They stopped in northwestern Missouri, where Newton purchased a farm at Lafayette Township, Clinton County. After a brief sojourn there, Baughman prepared to set out for California. To finance the trip, he sold three of Dave and Matilda's children to a slave trader. Baughman promised Dave the opportunity to purchase his freedom if the slave accompanied him to California and worked the diggings with him. Baughman set the price of Dave's freedom at \$1,000 (the present-day equivalent of \$29,000).<sup>155</sup> Boffman readily accepted, hoping not only to gain freedom for himself, but also to free and reunite his family.

In May 1851, Boffman and Baughman started out for California, planning to follow the Platte to Fort Kearny and then continue along the California Trail to Sacramento. Boffman's trek across the plains was fraught with danger and drama. At the outset, he was somehow separated from his owner but decided to press on to Fort Kearny on his own. He kept a sharp lookout for the slave-catchers who lurked around the departure points for the overland trails, knowing they would not hesitate to kidnap vulnerable black people whether they were slaves, fugitives, or free. But as Boffman trudged along the trail, he encountered a party of armed slave hunters with bloodhounds. His only recourse was to dive into the river and swim to the other side as the slave-catchers' bullets pelted the water. Boffman escaped this gang of slave-catchers but had to plunge into the water to avoid capture on two more occasions before finally reaching Fort Kearny. He

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<sup>154</sup> Phil Reader, "Uncle Dave's Story: The Life of Ex-Slave Dave Boffman," Parts 1-2. Santa Cruz Public Library, <http://www.santacruzpl.org/history/articles/207/> [accessed July 21, 2010].

<sup>155</sup> Reader, "Uncle Dave's Story," Part 1.

found his owner waiting for him there. This was the first of three encounters with slave-catchers in which he was forced to take to the water to avoid capture.<sup>156</sup>

After stopping over at the fort to rest for a few days, Boffman and Baughman continued their trip across the plains and into the Rocky Mountains. It was at this point in the journey that the two men were twice set upon by Indian raiders. They fended off the attackers in the first skirmish, but in the second raid the slave owner escaped while Boffman, who was not allowed to have a firearm, was taken prisoner. He later recalled that he was “marched with much ceremony” into the Indian camp, where the people (possibly Cheyenne) constantly touched and rubbed him because he was the first black man any of them had ever seen. They considered him to be an omen of good luck. His special status with the tribe worked to his advantage because he was left unguarded and was able to get away from his captors.<sup>157</sup> After his escape, Dave continued pushing west, once again meeting up with Newton Baughman at Fort Laramie. There the two men joined a wagon company and completed the journey to California without further incident.

Many white Missourians regarded free blacks with hatred and suspicion. In 1835, 1843, and 1847, Missouri officials passed laws prohibiting freedmen from entering the state and requiring those already residing there to obtain and carry a license. Unlicensed free black people were subject to fines ranging from \$10 to \$100 or might be jailed as runaway slaves.<sup>158</sup> African Americans in Missouri carried the burden of proof of their legal status. In 1841, the Missouri Supreme Court ruled that “in all slaveholding States *color* raises the presumption of slavery, and until the contrary is shown, a man or woman of color is deemed to be a slave.”<sup>159</sup> Free black

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Donnie D. Bellamy, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Missouri, 1820-1860,” *Missouri Historical Review* 67 (January 1973): 205.

<sup>159</sup> Judge William B. Napton ruling for the Missouri Supreme Court, quoted in Bellamy, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Missouri,” 207.

Missourians were, therefore, routinely sold into bondage.<sup>160</sup> The same fate could and sometimes did befall free blacks outfitting or waiting in the Missouri River towns before starting west.

Even free blacks residing in free states were vulnerable to being kidnapped and taken to Missouri to be auctioned off as slaves. This was the case of Fanny Wigglesworth, who lived with her husband, Vincent, and their four children in Moscow, Ohio (approximately 18 miles southeast of Cincinnati). In 1842, slave hunters broke into the Wigglesworth home, abducted Fanny and the children and spirited them off to Platte County, Missouri, where they were sold into slavery. Despite Ohio's indictment and extradition orders against two of the slave hunters, they never were prosecuted. The fate of Fanny Wigglesworth and her children remains a mystery.<sup>161</sup>

Nor were blacks who traveled under the protection of white escorts safe; they too risked capture and re-enslavement in the towns along the Missouri River. In 1853, Charlotta Gordon Pyles, her husband, Harry MacHenry Pyles, and their 18-member extended family were escorted out of Kentucky by Charlotta's former owner, Frances Gordon, who had manumitted Charlotta. The Pyles family was bound for Minnesota. Fearing that slave-catchers might accost them en

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<sup>160</sup> Bellamy, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Missouri," 206-207. See also Kenneth MacKenzie to Gabriel S. Chouteau, letter dated St. Louis, May 3, 1843, regarding MacKenzie's refusal to pay for a "negro woman and children bid off by me at the Court House" because they "claim that they are free and that a suit has been instituted for the purpose of obtaining their freedom." This letter is located in Missouri Historical Society, A1518 Slaves and Slavery Collection, 1772-1950, Folder 4, dated 1843 May 3.

<sup>161</sup> For a summary of the Fanny Wigglesworth incident, see Stanley Harrold, *Border War: Fighting Over Slavery before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 61. Also see Tom Calarco, Cynthia Vogel, Kathryn Grover, Rae Hallstrom, Sharron L. Pope, and Melissa Waddy-Thibodeaux, *Places of the Underground Railroad: A Geographical Guide* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2011), 73; National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, The Clermont County, Ohio, Freedom Trail, Moscow Underground Railroad and Abolitionist Sites, "The Wigglesworth Kidnapping," [http://www.firstohio.com/maps/tours\\_pdf/Underground\\_Railroad\\_Tour.pdf](http://www.firstohio.com/maps/tours_pdf/Underground_Railroad_Tour.pdf) [accessed July 27, 2011]; Ann Hagedorn, *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2002), 223-224. Hagedorn's account of the Wigglesworth kidnapping mistakenly concludes that Ohio abolitionist Robert Fee "found the wife and children somewhere near Independence, Missouri and brought them home." See Hagedorn, *Beyond the River*, 224. In fact, Fee made two unsuccessful attempts to rescue Fanny Wigglesworth and her children.



route, Gordon enlisted a sympathetic Ohio minister to accompany them.<sup>162</sup> After arriving in St. Louis, Gordon hired another white man to guide them to their destination for a payment of \$100. Before leaving, the man demanded \$50 more, “threatening to turn them over to slaveholders in Missouri” if she refused. She immediately paid him.<sup>163</sup> The group continued their journey by wagon to Iowa, but were stopped several times by slave-catchers who ultimately “permitted them to go on grudgingly, but unmolested.”<sup>164</sup> The Pyles family never made it to Minnesota; instead, they settled in Keokuk, Iowa where Charlotta became active in the abolitionist cause. She used her lecture fees to buy several family members out of bondage. However, she and Harry were unable to rescue their son, Benjamin, who had been kidnapped and sold to Mississippi slave traders before they left Kentucky. While in Keokuk, they learned that he had been sold once again—this time into “Fayette County,” Missouri (probably LaFayette County), under the name of Benjamin Moore. The travails of the Pyles family illustrate the dangers faced by black travelers in the United States during the antebellum years.<sup>165</sup>

Thousands of blacks were sold at the slave auctions that routinely took place on the steps of the old courthouse in Independence; and thousands more were sold upriver at St. Louis, which had five public slave pens and more than two dozen slave agents who served buyers in the Lower Mississippi region. Shocked Northerners who stumbled across a public slave auction often

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<sup>162</sup> Margaret Ann Reid, “Charlotta Gordon Pyles,” *Notable Black American Women*, Book II, ed. Jessie Carney Smith (Detroit: Gale Research, Thomson Publishing, 1996), 535.

<sup>163</sup> Hallie Q. Brown, *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* (Xenia, Ohio: Aldine Publishing Company, 1926), 38.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>165</sup> Brown, *Homespun Heroines*, 40; Reid, “Charlotta Gordon Pyles,” 536. Brown and Reid both state that Benjamin “was sold into Fayette County,” this was probably LaFayette County (county seat, Lexington) located in west-central Missouri, east of Kansas City. LaFayette County was one of several counties settled mostly by southerners to the north and south of the Missouri River who brought their slaves and slaveholding traditions with them. This area became known as “Little Dixie.” See “LaFayette County, Missouri History,” <http://www.lcmogov.com/P-100/History.aspx> [accessed January 8, 2012].

recorded the sight in their journals. California-bound diarist William Lewis Manly, waiting to depart from St. Joseph, wrote:

One side of the street had a platform such as we build for a political speaker. The auctioneer mounted this with a black boy about 18 years old, and after he had told all his good qualities, and had the boy stand up bold and straight, he called for bids, and they started him at \$500. He rattled away as if he were selling a steer, and when Mr. Rubideaux [sic], the founder of St. Jo bid \$800, he went no higher and the boy was sold.<sup>166</sup>

This was the environment that greeted black emigrants who awaited departure in the jumping-off places. The diverse economic and racial milieu of the outfitting towns held out glimpses of freedom's possibilities. At the same time, law and custom reinforced the racial proscriptions that denied them access. Black overlanders outfitted themselves with the material goods necessary for their trip and undertook their journey with optimism about the future. Their optimism, however, was grounded firmly in the realities of the old world they hoped finally to leave behind as they made their way across the plains.

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<sup>166</sup> For discussion of slave auctions in Independence, see "Black History in Independence: Black History Month Celebrates Historic Sites and Attractions," *Road and Travel Magazine*, 2006. For John Hudson's description of a slave auction, see John Hudson, *A Forty-niner in Utah With the Stansbury Expedition of Great Salt Lake: Letters and Journal of John Hudson, 1848-50*, ed. Brigham D. Madsen (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Tanner Trust Fund: Salt Lake City, Utah, 1981), digital transcription by Kay Threlkeld, National Park Service, January, 2008, 25, 42 (note 64); William Lewis Manly, *Death Valley in '49: The Autobiography of a Pioneer, Detailing his Life from a Humble Home in the Green Mountains to the Gold Mines of California; and Particularly Reciting the Sufferings of the Band of Men, Women, and Children Who Gave "Death Valley" Its Name* (1849; digital repr., Project Gutenberg, 2004), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12236/12236-h/12236-h.htm> [accessed December 12, 2008]. In the Manly quote, the spelling of the name of one of the founders of present-day St. Joseph varies frequently in narratives, but the correct spelling is "Robidou.".

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PROVIDENTIAL CORRIDOR

#### **The Complex of Trails: Experiencing the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails**

A network of exploration, military, communications, trade, stage, and emigration routes developed between the Missouri River and the West Coast during the mid-nineteenth century. Four of these—the Oregon, California, Pony Express, and Mormon emigrant trails—shared a common broad corridor across the Central Plains and through the Rocky Mountains. A schematic map of the primary emigrant trail routes described in this chapter is provided on page 225 in the Appendix. (see Appendix, Chapter 3, Map 2). For more detailed maps of each of the four emigrant routes that are the focus of this report, see the National Park Service interpretive brochures and fold-out maps for the California Trail, Oregon Trail, and Mormon Pioneer Trail. These may be requested, free of charge, at [NTSL\\_interpretation@nps.gov](mailto:NTSL_interpretation@nps.gov).

These intertwining trails have been likened to a braided rope that is frayed at both ends.<sup>167</sup> At the eastern end, frayed strands of the rope led from numerous Missouri River settlements into the Platte River Valley of today's Nebraska. Several strands carried traffic from the southern jumping-off points of Independence, Westport, Kansas City, Leavenworth, Atchison, St. Joseph, and Amazonia. These feeder routes, used heavily in the 1840s, merged to follow the Little Blue River across northeastern Kansas to the Platte River, to join the main trail corridor going west toward Fort Kearny.<sup>168</sup>

In 1846, Mormons began establishing new trailheads farther north to accommodate their own parallel emigration to the Great Salt Lake Valley in today's Utah. Their initial settlements at

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<sup>167</sup> See Unruh, *The Plains Across*, Map 4, 238; Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 5-6.

<sup>168</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 68-73, 97-98; Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*, 5-7, and *The Great Platte River Road*, 103-135.

Winter Quarters (Omaha), Nebraska, and Council Bluffs, Iowa, soon were joined by the Missouri River towns of Bellevue, Plattsmouth, Old Wyoming, Minersville, and Nebraska City, all in Nebraska. These settlements were located much nearer the Platte River (a tributary of the Missouri) than were the Kansas and Missouri jumping-off places. While commercial and military traffic from St. Joseph and Leavenworth continued to use the Kansas feeder routes to the Platte Valley, by the early 1850s most emigrants chose to depart from the northern Missouri River towns, eliminating nearly 200 miles of overland travel across Kansas.

Oregon- and California-bound travelers continued west along the south bank of the Platte while Mormon emigrants, hoping to avoid conflict, usually followed a church-sanctioned trail along the north side of the river. (The “Mormon Trail,” which originally was an Indian and fur trade trail, was not truly segregated. Oregon- and California-bound emigrants who jumped off from the Nebraska settlements north of the Platte River joined the north-bank Mormon traffic.) National Park Service historian Merrill Mattes fittingly named this broad, shared corridor “The Great Platte River Road.”<sup>169</sup>

Sylvia Estes [Stark] was one of many travelers who regarded the prairie as the most pleasant part of the overland trek. Sylvia was a young African American girl who left Missouri in 1851 with her parents, Howard and Hannah Estes, and her brother, Jackson, bound for California. She later recalled that she and her brother “found life on the great plains something new and thrilling.” They were captivated by the “little prairie dogs barking and scampering” as people approached them and by the large herds of buffalo “stampeding at the sight of the

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<sup>169</sup> Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*, xi-xii, and *The Great Platte River Road*, 7-8.

caravan.” Sylvia spent hours gathering bright prairie wildflowers while walking along the trail, “only to throw them away as there was no place to put them.”<sup>170</sup>

The Great Platte River Road was generally regarded as the easiest part of the trails west. The terrain was gentle, water and fuel (buffalo “chips”) were readily available, the prairie provided pasturage for the draft animals, and the ground surface was smooth and hard, well suited for wagon traffic. Here emigrants were seldom out of sight of a wagon: the trains appeared to be an “endless caravan of white-topped wagons,” an unrelenting “moving, mooing mob” that extended as far as the eye could see.<sup>171</sup>

At the fork of the river near today’s community of North Platte, Nebraska, the trails turned up the North Platte toward Fort Laramie, a major milestone of the emigration. There, at the western edge of the Great Plains, the land begins to rise toward the Rocky Mountains—the prairie schooner’s equivalent of a sea change. West of the Continental Divide awaited the most serious challenges of the overland trek. In preparation for the difficulties ahead, emigrants often paused at Fort Laramie to relieve their wagons of unnecessary weight. In fact, the entire Platte River Road had become a long, linear dump as travelers abandoned family possessions, equipment, and even foodstuffs along the trail; but many emigrants held onto some of their unneeded goods in hope of selling or exchanging them at Fort Laramie. Usually disappointed in that hope, before continuing west into the Rockies they purged their wagons to spare their oxen

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<sup>170</sup> Mary Albertina Stark Wallace, “Recollections of Sylvia Stark, Part 2”, n. d., online at Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History: Who Killed William Robinson?, <http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/robinson/archives/diaryjournalreminiscence/3109en> [accessed July 14, 2009] (hereafter cited as Sylvia Stark Interview). Mary Albertina Stark Wallace was the daughter of Sylvia Estes Stark and Louis Stark. The original Sylvia Stark interviews are located in Salt Spring Island Historical Society Archives, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia), Add, Mss. 91.

<sup>171</sup> For a description of the course of the road see, Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*, 5-7, and *The Great Platte River Road*, especially, 103-139; Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 89-91; and Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 119-122. See also National Park Service, *National Historic Trails Auto Tour Route Interpretive Guide: Nebraska and Northeastern Colorado*, by Lee Kreutzer (Salt Lake City: National Trails System-Intermountain Region, August 2006), 3; National Park Service, *National Historic Trails Auto Tour Route Interpretive Guide Across Wyoming* (Salt Lake City: National Trails System-Intermountain Region, July 2007), 7-11; and individual National Park Service map brochures for each trail.

on the hard road ahead.<sup>172</sup> Alvin Coffey, a black emigrant who made his first overland trek from Missouri to California in 1849 as the slave of Dr. William Bassett, recalled in his autobiography that his party “got across the plains to Fort Laramie on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June and the ignorant ox driver broke down a good many oxen on the trains. There were a good many ahead of us who had doubled up their trains and left tons upon tons of bacon and other provisions.”<sup>173</sup>

Beyond the fort, the trail corridor followed the arc of the North Platte River into what is now central Wyoming. West of today’s city of Casper the river turns south toward Colorado, but the trail continued west toward the Rocky Mountains. This split marked the terminus of the Great Platte River Road. It also was the end of the separate Mormon Trail. Utah-bound emigrants merged with the Oregon-California traffic here and all travelers flowed west together, leaving the Platte River lifeline that had conducted them across hundreds of miles of prairie and plain.<sup>174</sup> After a dry overland stretch of about 30 miles, the combined trail entered the Sweetwater River Valley and began the final, gradual climb toward South Pass and the Continental Divide. Along the way, emigrants marveled at the natural landmarks of Independence Rock, Devil’s Gate, Split Rock and Ice Slough. South Pass itself was visually so unremarkable that many travelers passed through without realizing until hours later that they had crossed the Continental Divide and entered the Oregon Country.

Yet South Pass was perhaps the most significant milestone of the entire overland journey. The Rocky Mountains were a serious obstacle to wagon travel. Men on horseback could cross in many places by rough routes that wagons could not traverse. Until South Pass was discovered (twice) by mountain men in the 1820s and 1830s (it was already well known by American

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<sup>172</sup> Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 50-52; Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 149-155.

<sup>173</sup> Alvin Coffey, *The Autobiography of Alvin A. Coffey* (1891; repr., *The Pioneer* 23, no. 1, December 2000), 11. See also LeRoy R. Hafen and Francis Marion Young, *Fort Laramie and the Pageant of the West, 1834-1890* (1938; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 150-154.

<sup>174</sup> This description of the route is derived from National Park Service, *Across Wyoming*, 7-11.

Indians), there was no feasible wagon route through the central Rockies. However, wagons could easily traverse South Pass, with its gradual slope and broad, open summit. Lee Kreutzer, cultural resource specialist for the National Park Service National Trails Intermountain Region, has written that without this “accident of geography,” perhaps there would have been “no Oregon Trail, no California Trail, no Mormon Utah” and no United States “stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific.” South Pass stood as the “Gateway to the West.”<sup>175</sup>

At the Continental Divide, the western end of the trail “rope” began to fray. The original trunk of the emigrant trail traced a V-shape from South Pass, bending southwest toward Fort Bridger in southwestern Wyoming and then turning northwest to Fort Hall on Idaho’s Snake River. Later trail variants, including the Sublette Cutoff (est. 1844), the Kinney Cutoff (est. 1852), and the Lander Road (est. 1859), cut across the top of the V to create shorter routes to Fort Hall. Another important trail strand, the Hastings Cutoff, split off from the point of the V at Fort Bridger and took a southwesterly course through the Wasatch Mountains to the Great Salt Lake Valley. Originally blazed by Lansford W. Hastings and the Donner Party in 1846 as an alternate route to California, the Hastings Cutoff became the route used by Mormon pioneers going to the Salt Lake Valley, the terminus of the Mormon Trail. Some parties of Forty-niners also followed the Hastings into Salt Lake City in order to resupply before continuing west across the Great Salt Desert and rejoining the main flow of California Trail traffic on the Humboldt River.

From Fort Hall, the primary Oregon-California trail corridor continued westerly along the Snake River. Traveling the Snake River was nothing like travel along the friendly Platte, for the

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<sup>175</sup> National Park Service, “South Pass, Fremont County, Wyoming,” California National Historic Trail, <http://www.nps.gov/cali/planyourvisit/site7.htm> [accessed June 1, 2011]; National Park Service, *Across Wyoming*, 4.

Snake lies deep between imposing basalt cliffs. Much of the country was dry and littered with sharp volcanic rock, and the water at the bottom of the gorge was difficult and sometimes impossible to reach. Emigrants complained about the rough trail and thick dust along the way and worried about attack by Indians and white marauders: several deadly and highly publicized attacks, not all unprovoked, occurred along the Snake River trails. At the Raft River, west of today's Pocatello, Idaho, the California and Oregon Trails diverged. Oregon traffic continued down the Snake River into present-day Oregon, cut northwest across rugged country to the Columbia River, and floated the river or took an overland alternate to the Willamette Valley. However, traffic bound for California, along with some Oregon emigrants taking a long back-route (the Applegate Trail) to their destination, diverged to the southwest and followed the Humboldt River across Nevada.

The Humboldt River trail was misery for the emigrants, who complained of river water contaminated by dead livestock, swarms of biting insects, lack of grass for the mules and oxen, and Indians picking off their cattle. At this point in the journey, too, many had finished off their provisions and now (especially during the initial gold rush years) were reduced to eating lizards, rodents, and the rotting carrion of draft animals that had died along the trail. In western Nevada the California Trail began to fray wildly, and some emigrants were happy for the chance to leave the "Humbug" River corridor to try their luck on the Lassen or Nobles Trails into Northern California, or the notorious Applegate Trail into Oregon.

The Applegate, also known as the Southern Road to Oregon, crossed the fearsome Black Rock Desert of western Nevada, clipped the northeastern corner of California, and turned north along the western foot of the Cascade Mountain range to end at The Dalles, Oregon.



Moses “Black” Harris (who is discussed in greater detail later in this study) was part of Jesse Applegate’s exploration party, which blazed this trail in 1846 to provide a safe land route for emigrants who did not want to raft the dangerous rapids of the Columbia River. Harris was a warmly regarded mountain man who made a second career as a trail guide after the beaver trade died out. He was known for his good nature, his wilderness expertise, and his physical stamina. Some said Harris was a former slave from South Carolina or Kentucky, and many have inferred from his nickname that Harris was African American like his fellow mountain man, Jim Beckwourth. Beckwourth himself, and Jesse Applegate, as well, said Harris was a white man. Others refer to him as a black man. The question of Harris’s race is still debated. Black or white, Harris wrote a letter to the *Oregon Spectator* in the fall of 1846 publicly praising the Applegate Trail as a “shorter and in all respects better route than any heretofore known.”<sup>176</sup> Nonetheless, the first emigrants to try that shorter, better route in the late summer of 1846 began straggling into the Willamette Valley starving, exhausted, and *very* angry in late November 1846. Harris ended up returning to rescue some of the emigrants who were stranded on the trail he had helped to blaze. Most who used this difficult route in 1846 denounced it as a scam, although others who tried the “Southern Road” over the next few years found it adequate. The route was only rarely used after 1849.<sup>177</sup>

Joseph Alonzo Stuart was one of the few who chose the Applegate route in 1850. Stuart, himself near collapse while trudging through the Black Rock Desert, encountered an enslaved black woman sitting alone on a rock beside the trail. Her master, to spare his teams the weight,

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<sup>176</sup> For a biographical sketch of Harris, see Jerome Peltier, “Moses ‘Black’ Harris,” in *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 4, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark, 1966), 103-117; Moses Harris, letter to the editor, *Oregon Spectator*, November 26, 1846, quoted in Ross A. Smith, “The Southern Route Revisited,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 105, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 14, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ohq/105.2/smith.html> [accessed August 12, 2010];

Stafford Hazelett, “Let Us Honor Those to Whom Honor is Due,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 111, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 2-3, 24, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ohq/111.2/hazelett.html> [accessed August 12, 2010].

<sup>177</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 348-350; Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 296-304.

had taken a heavy pack of bacon from the wagon and loaded it onto her back. He had then driven off to find water, leaving her to catch up if she could. “She was a woman alone and heavily loaded and almost in despair,” Stuart wrote. “Cheering her drooping spirits with the hope that the end could not be far ahead, I relieved her of her load and we trudged on with renewed courage.” When the two finally caught up with her party, he continued, “we found only the camp of a low-bred Missourian and his family, owner of the female chattel we had assisted and without thanks or even a cup of coffee or morsel of the bacon I had carried, we delivered her over to their clutches.”<sup>178</sup>

Instead of tempting fate on the Applegate (and the Nobles and Lassen trails, which branched off from it), most emigrants stuck with the main California Trail along the Humboldt River to the Humboldt Sink. These travelers would stop to rest and feed their livestock at Big Meadows, at present-day Lovelock, Nevada, before continuing to the sink and heading into the deadly Fortymile Desert just ahead. At the brink of the desert, travelers could choose between the Truckee River route on the north side of the desert and the Carson River route on the south side, but the trails were about equally miserable: forty miles of roasting, featureless plain, devoid of vegetation and shade. Emigrants who had tended their cattle well, sparing them weight and the whip, resting and feeding and watering them throughout the journey, might cross safely without mishap or loss. Some travelers started into the desert with wagons and livestock but lost all in the desert and were lucky to escape with their lives. Many emigrants, having lost their draft animals and abandoned their wagons farther east, faced the entire 40-mile crossing on foot—as did slaves

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<sup>178</sup> Joseph Alonzo Stuart, *My Roving Life: A Diary of Travels and Adventures by Sea and Land, During Peace and War*, vol. I (self-published in Auburn, California, 1895), as quoted in Richard K. Brock, ed., *Emigrant Trails West: A Guide to the Applegate Trail, the South Road to Oregon, From Lassen Meadows to Southern Oregon* (Reno: Trails West, Inc., 2004).

and those few confident souls who had set out from Missouri with nothing but a pack or a wheelbarrow to carry their provisions.

Margaret Frink, a white overland diarist traveling in 1850, observed an unidentified black woman afoot and alone at Big Meadows. She was, wrote Frink, “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 California.”<sup>179</sup> Beyond Big Meadows lay the Humboldt Sink and then the formidable Fortymile Desert, where emigrants sometimes collapsed and died from heat and thirst. The fate of that lone black pioneer, who may have been a free woman reaching for her dreams or a slave left to fend for herself, is unknown.

Beyond the Fortymile Desert, travelers continued toward the elbow of today’s state of Nevada, following the Truckee and Carson rivers. Approaching the Sierra Nevada, those trails forked again and again, sending multiple trail strands through the mountains and on to journey’s end: the gold fields and rich farm country of Northern California.<sup>180</sup>

### **The Complex of Trails: Experiencing the Southern Trails to California**

Most African Americans, like white emigrants, traveled the overland routes known today as the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails. But they also traveled west along a complex of lesser-known southern trails with more exotic names. These trails, though beyond the scope of this study, are important to note since African Americans were a visible presence there, as well.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Margaret Frink, quoted in Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 30.

<sup>180</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 56, 211-213, 308-309.

<sup>181</sup> For more detail on the lesser-known southern routes, see Gregory Franzwa, “Covered Wagon Roads to the American West” (Tucson: The Patrice Press, 1998), a map prepared in cooperation with the Long Distance Trails Office, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as Franzwa, “Covered Wagon Roads”). See also The TNGenNet, “Trails West: A Map of Early Western Migration Trails,” <http://www.tngenweb.org/tnletters/usa-west.htm> [accessed June 26, 2011]; Oregon-California Trails Association, Southern Trails Chapter, “Proposal for a New Southern National Historic Trail” (n.d.),

Many of the southern routes passed through the important transportation and commerce hub of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Among them were the renowned Santa Fe Trail, which carried emigrant and trade traffic from Independence, Missouri, to Santa Fe; and the Fort Smith-Santa Fe Trail, which took Southern Forty-niners from Fort Smith, Arkansas, across Indian Territory (Oklahoma) and the Texas panhandle to Santa Fe. (see Appendix, Chapter 3, Map 3). Trails departing Santa Fe for California included the Old Spanish Trail, Beale's Wagon Road, and the Southern Trail, which all led to Los Angeles.<sup>182</sup>

Other routes crossed central Texas and merged with the westerly trails south of Santa Fe. Travelers starting out from the Old South could cross the Gulf of Mexico to Galveston, then go to El Paso via the Lower Emigrant Road through San Antonio or the Upper Emigrant Road through Austin. From El Paso, travelers continued north up the Rio Grande to join the Southern Trail, the Gila Trail, or Beale's Wagon Road to Southern California.<sup>183</sup>

The southern trails were the most direct routes for those starting out from the South. During the early years of the California gold rush, three black men known only as Smith (also called Tom in some accounts), "Negro" Joe, and Little West were members of a Mississipp-

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[http://southern-trails.org/PDF/Proposal\\_for\\_a\\_%20New\\_Southern\\_National\\_Historic\\_Trail.pdf](http://southern-trails.org/PDF/Proposal_for_a_%20New_Southern_National_Historic_Trail.pdf) [accessed June 26, 2011]; and National Park Service, *Comprehensive Management and Use Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement, California National Historic Trail, Pony Express National Historic Trail; Management and Use Plan Update/Final Environmental Impact Statement, Oregon National Historic Trail, Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail* (Salt Lake City: National Park Service, 1999), especially "Additional Routes for the California National Historic Trail," 71, 73, 75. See also Blaine P. Lamb, "Travelers on the California Leg of the Southern Route 1849-1852," a publication of California State Parks, [http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=24680](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=24680) [accessed September 4, 2010].

<sup>182</sup> Franzwa, "Covered Wagon Roads"; National Park Service, *Comprehensive Management Plan*, 75; Oregon-California Trails Association, "Proposal for a New Southern National Historic Trail"; Lamb, "Travelers on the California Leg of the Southern Route 1849-1852," 3; Stanislaus Lasselle, "The 1849 Diary of Stanislaus Lasselle," ed. Patricia A. Etter, *Overland Journal* 9, no. 2 (1991): 27, n.3.

<sup>183</sup> Franzwa, "Covered Wagon Roads"; Lamb, "Travelers on the California Leg of the Southern Route 1849-1852," 3; Harlan Hague, "The Search for a Southern Overland Route to California," <http://www.softadventure.net/roadcal.htm>, 6-7 [accessed September 4, 2010]; Phil Brigandi, "The Southern Emigrant Trail," *Overland Journal* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 103-104; Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 110-111, 386-387; U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, "Old Spanish Trail/Mormon Road Historic District," *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*, prepared by Terri McBride, Nevada State Historic Preservation Office, in collaboration with Stanton D. Rolf, Las Vegas Field Office [Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2001]. See especially section 7, 1, section 8, 1-6.

Georgia company that became lost in Death Valley while attempting an untested “cutoff” through the Sierra Nevada in December 1849. The sufferings of that company gave the valley its sober name, and the ultimate fates of the three black Forty-niners remain a mystery.<sup>184</sup>

Some deep-South slave-owners took the Gila Trail, dipping down into southern New Mexico and southern Arizona to reach California. Judge Benjamin Hayes came via the Gila Trail, along with three unidentified slaves in the two companies in which he traveled. In another party, a white emigrant on the Gila Trail noted that there were two “negroes named Bob and Jane” in his party. Emigrant journalist William Lorton, who was a clockmaker and a talented singer, came across the Mojave River along with an Arkansas slave owner and his unidentified slave. Lorton recalled that the slave-owner “slept under the same blankets with the black man.” There were at least three African Americans in Lorton’s company. During the trek to southern California, Lorton recalled joining in a “negro concert in [the] New York boys’ tent.”<sup>185</sup>

Jacob Stover was among a party of Iowa gold-seekers who started west along the Platte River Road, took the Mormon Road from Salt Lake City to southern Utah, and went thence to southern California via the Old Spanish Trail in 1849. On Christmas Day, his company reached Rancho Cucamonga, a cattle ranch and vineyard that was owned by Victor Prudomme, a Frenchman who lived in Los Angeles. Stover wrote in his memoirs that the site was called “Pokamongo Ranch in Spanish; in English, Negro Ranch,” and they were met by “the owner

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<sup>184</sup> “Black Forty-niners,” Death Valley National Park, History and Culture: People, <http://www.nps.gov/deva/historyculture/people.htm> [accessed August 29, 2011]; Carl I. Wheat, “The Forty-Niners in Death Valley: A Tentative Census,” *Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly* 21(December 1939): 112, reprinted online, <http://www.scvhistory.com/scvhistory/wheat-49ers.htm> [accessed January 10, 2012]. Wheat lists “Tom (Negro),” “Joe (Negro),” and “‘Little West’ (Negro)” as members of “The Mississippi Boys,” which was part of a larger group of Mississippians who broke away from the Jayhawkers and Briers parties near Towne’s Pass. Wheat notes that “only the names of these three Negro slaves have apparently been recorded.” Rudolph Lapp refers to “Tom” as one of the three slaves who were in the Death Valley group. See Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 31.

<sup>185</sup> Lorton quoted in Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 31. For Lorton’s comment about the “negro concert,” see Edward Leo Lyman, *The Overland Journey from Utah to California: Wagon Travel from the City of Saints to the City of Angeles* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004), 58-59.

[who] was a negro.” In reality, the black man, whose name was Jackson, was not the owner of the ranch, but managed it with his Hispanic wife and several Indian ranch hands. Stover recalled that when he and his exhausted party straggled in, Jackson and the Indians were engaged in making wine in “rather a novel way to us.”

The process involved a beef hide with a hole cut in the center with four forks planted in the ground and four poles “run through holes cut in the edge of the hide which bagged down so it would hold two or three bushels of grapes.” On each side of the skin were two forks with a pole tied to both. Stover wrote that two “buck Indians, stripped off naked, took hold of this pole with their hands and tramped the grapes. The wine would run.” While Jackson looked on, the overlanders first ate the grapes then “went at the wine, caught it in our tin cups, as we all had one apiece.” He recalled that “we drank it as fast as the Indians could tramp it for awhile.” Jackson encouraged their revelry, saying, “Gentlemen, you have had a hard time of it, I know, but de first ting you know[,] you will know noting. You are welcome to it.” The next day, Jackson dispatched two of his ranch hands to get beef for the visitors. Stover wrote that they soon were feasting on beef and corn meal. They “ate what [they] could, thanked him and started for Los Angeles.”<sup>186</sup>

In 1849, two African Americans who set out from Missouri as slaves to a wealthy merchant, James M. White, encountered danger and ultimately death along the Santa Fe Trail when their party was attacked by Indians. White left Independence, Missouri on September 15,

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<sup>186</sup> Jacob Stover, “The Jacob Y. Stover Narrative: History of the Sacramento Mining Company of 1849, Written by One of Its Number Jacob Y. Stover,” ed. John Walton Caughey, *Pacific Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (June 1937): 176-177. See especially 177, n. 25 regarding Jackson, the African American manager who was in charge of Prudhomme’s Rancho Cucamonga. Although Stover does not state that the grapes being pressed by the Indians were fermented, his description indicates that the men became intoxicated after drinking the juice and “began to tumble over and the wine came up as fast as it went down.” He wrote that Jackson “got a spade and gave it to me, told me to dig holes at their mouths. So I did.” At the end of the night, Stover and one other man in his party “were the only ones left on our feet,” 177. For a bit more about Rancho Cucamonga and Jackson, also see Lyman, *The Overland Journey from Utah to California*, 57.

1849, with his wife, Ann, their infant daughter, Virginia, and two slaves, Ben Bushman, described as a “mulatto servant,” and an unidentified slave woman.<sup>187</sup>

They traveled in a 13-wagon caravan laden with goods and bound for White’s far-flung business holdings. Seasoned Santa Fe trader Francis X. Aubry led the party. The White party, anxious to get to their destination, left Aubry’s train in present-day western Kansas. The Whites, their slaves, and three armed men, heedless of Aubry’s warnings, set out for Santa Fe, taking the faster but more dangerous Cimarron Cutoff. About 70 miles from Barclay’s Fort in New Mexico Territory at a place known as Point of Rocks, a band of Ute and Jicarilla Indians overtook the group. The attackers killed James White, the slave Ben Bushman, and the other men in their party. Ann and Virginia White and the female slave were taken prisoner by the Indians. The incident made national headlines and ignited public outrage. The Army dispatched a rescue team to find the captives, and Kit Carson served as the tracker and guide for the expedition. Contemporary accounts of the event disagree about the fate of Ann and Virginia White, some saying they were found murdered, others claiming she and her child adopted the Jicarilla culture and spent the rest of their days living with the Indians. The fate of the unnamed slave woman, who was an involuntary emigrant, aroused little concern at the time and remains a mystery.<sup>188</sup>

### **Other Routes**

Thousands of overlanders trudged across the California and Oregon trails and the southern roads, but these were not the only passageways to the west. California-bound emigrants living in the Atlantic states most frequently came by sea, sailing around South America and up

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<sup>187</sup> Gregory Michno and Susan Michno, *A Fate Worse Than Death: Indian Captives in the West, 1830-1885* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2007), 99-100.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 100; Maria E. Montoya, *Translating Property: The Maxwell Land Grant and the Conflict over Land in the American West, 1840-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 41. For differing accounts of the fate of the white captives see Montoya, *Translating Property*, 228, n. 60; Hampton Sides, *Blood and Thunder: An Epic of the American West* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 241, 252; and Jay W. Sharp, “Desert Trails: Kit Carson and the Santa Fe Trail,” *Desert USA*, <http://www.desertusa.com/mag03/trails/trails08.html> [accessed August 9, 2010].

California's West Coast. Others could choose a combination of sea and land travel through Nicaragua, Panama, or Mexico. Of the total migration to the Pacific Coast, no more than half of all emigrants took the sea-land route.<sup>189</sup>

Barney L. Ford, the Virginia slave who (as mentioned above) eventually traveled overland to settle in Colorado, was an African American who first attempted western migration via the sea-land route. Ford, born on January 22, 1822, in Stafford, Virginia, grew up on a South Carolina plantation. He escaped slavery in 1848 at the age of 26 by walking off the Mississippi steamboat on which he worked. He made his way to Chicago, where he met Henry O. Wagoner, a leader in the Underground Railroad. Ford immediately immersed himself in abolitionist and Underground Railroad activities in Chicago. In 1851, he caught gold fever and with his wife, Julia Lyoni Ford (Wagoner's sister-in-law), set out for California via the sea-land route through Nicaragua. Fearing re-enslavement if they traveled down the Mississippi River to New Orleans (the fastest and cheapest way to the Nicaragua crossing), Barney and Julia instead steamed out of New York on a ship bound for Greytown, Nicaragua. Shortly after arriving in Nicaragua, Ford abandoned his California plans and, taking advantage of the lucrative western migration traffic, opened a thriving hotel business in Greytown. The Fords remained there until wartime upheaval destroyed their property and threatened their lives.<sup>190</sup> After returning to Chicago, the Fords once again headed west in 1860, this time taking the overland route to Denver. There Barney Ford

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<sup>189</sup> Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*, xii.

<sup>190</sup> Moya Hansen, "Ford, Barney L. 1822-1902," *The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/ford-barney-1-1822-1902> [accessed August 7, 2010]; Brooke Cleary, "Barney L. Ford: Runaway Slave, Denver Pioneer," Colorado Historical Society, 2001, adapted from "Barney Ford—From Plantation Slave to Denver Leader" by David F. Halass, *Colorado History NOW*, October, 2000, [www.docstoc.com/docs/44329510/BARNEY-FORD](http://www.docstoc.com/docs/44329510/BARNEY-FORD) [accessed September 23, 2010]; National Park Service, "Barney L. Ford Building," *Aboard the Underground Railroad: A National Register Travel Itinerary*, <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/co1.htm> [accessed June 25, 2011].



became a respected hotelier, businessman, and activist in the fight for civil rights for black Coloradans.<sup>191</sup>

### **Mapping the Way**

Cartographic historian Richard V. Francaviglia has noted that nothing increased the knowledge of the unknown places in the West more than the “firsthand experience of colonists and travelers” whose personal accounts, maps, and guidebooks “filled pages of text and drew new lines on well-worn maps.”<sup>192</sup> No matter what course overland emigrants decided to take in the opening years of the great migration, most were unfamiliar with western geography, and many set out without maps to follow. They were, as trails historian Will Bagley has written, “naïve sojourners.”<sup>193</sup>

When the Western Emigration Society left Missouri in the spring of 1841, they became the first overland emigrant wagon train to California. Company members were armed with romanticized notions about the West, a few flawed, outdated maps, and virtually no familiarity with the terrain or native peoples they might encounter along the way. John Bidwell, who helped organize the company and served as its secretary, recalled, “We knew that California lay west, and that was the extent of our knowledge.” Thirty-four members of the Society, known today as the Bidwell-Bartleson Party, later split away from the main group at today’s Soda Springs, Idaho, to make their own uncharted way to California. When the company elected John Bartleson captain, Bidwell observed, “no one knew where to go, not even the captain.”<sup>194</sup> This

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<sup>191</sup> Parkhill, *Mister Barney Ford*, especially, 38-67, 78-89; Cleary, “Barney L. Ford, Runaway Slave”; National Park Service, “Barney L. Ford Building”; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 202-203.

<sup>192</sup> Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination in the Great Basin*, 97.

<sup>193</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 88.

<sup>194</sup> Bidwell, quoted in Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 87-88, 106-110. See also Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 110, 118; Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, 15-16.

dilemma caused the Bidwell-Bartleson Party and other early emigrant groups to employ and sometimes kidnap Indians to point out the trails and locate watering and grazing sites.<sup>195</sup>

Most mapping of the west came after much of the trail had already been established by use, and by explorers who were seeking better alternate routes and cutoffs. As overland emigration gained momentum, and the drama of the emigrants' exploits and tribulations filtered back east, prospective overlanders clamored for more information about western routes and conditions. Eastern publishing firms rushed to fill the demand, churning out personal accounts, maps, and guidebooks which emigrants scoured for accurate advice. Some of the first sources depicting the western landscape, however, were of dubious merit. Among these were Lansford W. Hastings's *The Emigrants' Guide, to Oregon and California*, which was published in early 1845. It became the most notorious of the guidebooks because it provided virtually no information about the actual trail between Fort Bridger and California, and it included misleading advice about the difficulty of the journey.<sup>196</sup>

By 1846, however, the quality of overland guidebooks had risen considerably. Brigham Young's Latter-day Saints produced one of the most accurate and detailed guides of the route from Council Bluffs to the Salt Lake Valley. This guide, written by Mormon pioneer William Clayton, provided accurate mileages, latitudes, longitudes, altitudes, and other useful information. This and other new works provided the overlanders with useful and more accurate information about the physical characteristics of the trail.<sup>197</sup> In late 1848 and early 1849, Edwin Bryant's published account of his trip to California in 1846, *What I Saw in California*, gained enormous success and was widely used as a guide. Joseph E. Ware's *The Emigrants' Guide to*

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<sup>195</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 157.

<sup>196</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 133.

<sup>197</sup> William Clayton, *The Latter-Day Saints' Emigrants Guide* (1848; repr., Gerald, Mo.: Patrice Press, 1983); Richard T. Stillson, *Spreading the Word: A History of Information in the California Gold Rush* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 45, 47; Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 132-134.

*California* was also much used. John D. Unruh, Jr., has noted that Ware's book was "the nearly universal recommendation in 1849" of newspapers who "warmly endorsed many of the 'instant' guidebooks which appeared with the discovery of gold." Most emigrants, however, routinely damned Ware's guidebook.<sup>198</sup>

Prospective travelers also consulted the guides and maps of William Gilpin, William Emory, and John C. Fremont. Indeed Fremont's maps and descriptions of the Intermountain West and the Great Basin region contributed to the West's allure for many potential migrants. His western expeditions commenced in the early 1840s with the task of exploring and mapping the Great Plains and a path to the Pacific. Francaviglia has noted that Fremont's expeditions, information gathering, and "obsession with deciphering" the Intermountain West received considerable help from often-overlooked sources.<sup>199</sup> Those overlooked sources included the Native American populations he encountered on his western trek, and also Jacob Dodson, an 18-year-old freeborn African American resident of Washington, D.C., who volunteered to accompany the military man on his second trip in 1843.

Dodson was a member of a free black family in the employ of Fremont's father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. The young black man would make three trips with Fremont. Dodson first joined a 38-man party led by Fremont that set out from Westport, Missouri, on May 29, 1843. They traveled to Fort Vancouver in the Oregon Country via a fur trade route that was becoming known as the Oregon Trail. On the return trip, the party ventured through Utah, Colorado, and Kansas.

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<sup>198</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 60, 74-75, 160.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75. See also Stillson, *Spreading the Word*, 45, 47. The 1845 Fremont-Preuss maps were some of the earliest attempts at accurately mapping the Great Basin region of the West, and Fremont is responsible for coining the name "Great Basin." See Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination*, 82-90, 97, 105. For the quote about Fremont's overlooked sources, see Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination*, 82-83.

Dodson was listed as Fremont's personal servant, but he was much more than that. When 11 men of the party quit, Dodson stepped up to become one of the most important members of the expedition. In the winter of 1844 when the group was stuck in the Sierra, exhausted and starving, the teenager rode ahead of the main party to scout a path through the mountains. For his services between May 3, 1843, and September 6, 1844, he was paid \$493 (present-day equivalent of \$14,600). Dodson accompanied Fremont west again in 1845. On that journey, he was among the group who rode into California and participated in the American takeover of the Mexican territory at the beginning of the Mexican-American War. During the conflict, Dodson, Fremont, and Don Jesus Pico rode 840 miles round trip from Los Angeles to Monterey in eight days to alert the American army about a rumored attack by the Mexicans. In 1848, Dodson returned to Washington, D.C., and worked as a messenger for the U.S. Senate until his death (date unknown).<sup>200</sup>

### **The T. H. Jefferson Map**

The Fremont expeditions and the experiences of other overland travelers produced maps and guides that gained acceptance with potential migrants. However, another lesser known but intriguing map and trail guide also emerged during the dawning era of overland emigration. It was the work of an African American. T. H. Jefferson, who was likely the son of the slave Sally Hemings and her owner, President Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, created a remarkable map and guide from his own experiences on the overland trail.<sup>201</sup> T. H. Jefferson published the four-part

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<sup>200</sup> Shaun Michael Mars, "Jacob Dodson (1825-?)," *The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/dodson> [accessed September 18, 2010]; Pamela Herr and Mary Lee Spence, "'I Really Had Something Like the Blues': Letters from Jessie Benton Fremont to Elizabeth Blair Lee, 1847-1883," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 41 no. 2 (Spring 1991): 17-18; Taylor, *In Search of the Western Frontier*, 49.

<sup>201</sup> For a discussion of DNA evidence of Jefferson and his children with Hemings, see Frontline Documentary Films, "Interview with Dr. Eugene Foster: Jefferson's Blood," Public Broadcasting System documentary film and related transcripts and documentary materials available at the PBS website, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/true/>; Will Bagley, "Pioneer Map Leads Jefferson

*Map of the Emigrant Road from Independence, Mo., to St. Francisco California* in 1849 in New York. (see Appendix, Chapter 3, Maps 4-7). Historian Dale Morgan called it “one of the great American maps, an extraordinarily original production which will always have a special place in the cartography of the West, and which adds up to a trail document of high importance.”<sup>202</sup> The map is accurate down to the quarter-mile, providing emigrants with detailed information on the best campsites, watering locations, feeding grounds, road hazards, and points of interest. T. H. Jefferson received a copyright for the work in New York in 1849, and G. Snyder Company of New York City printed it that same year. The map and its 11-page *Accompaniment* sold for \$3 per copy. At least one gold-seeker, J. Goldsborough Bruff, traveled with a copy of the map when he came overland to California in 1849.<sup>203</sup>

Many scholars have concluded that Thomas Jefferson fathered several children with Sally Hemings, the black “half-sister of his deceased wife.” T. H. Jefferson would have been the couple’s eldest son, Thomas (Tom), who was “a teenager when Meriwether Lewis spent some time as a guest at Monticello before President Jefferson sent the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the West.”<sup>204</sup>

Constance Moore Richardson, the sixth-generation granddaughter of Jefferson and Hemings and president of the Thomas Woodson Family Association, said in an interview that the black side of the family has known for generations that T. H. Jefferson was the offspring of the

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Scandal to West,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, May 6, 2001. See also Rush Spedden, “Who Was T. H. Jefferson?,” *Overland Journal* 8, no. 3 (1990): 2-8; Fawn M. Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York: Bantam, 1974), especially 393-694. For a work that disputes the T. H. Jefferson lineage claims to the president, see Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

<sup>202</sup> T. H. Jefferson, *Map of the Emigrant Road From Independence, Mo., to St. Francisco, California, and Accompaniment* (1846; repr., San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1945); Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, vol. 1, 237. For more on the significance of the T. H. Jefferson map, see also J. Roderic Korns, “West from Fort Bridger: The Pioneering of the Immigrant Trails Across Utah, 1846-1850,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 19 (1951): 177-185, and *West from Fort Bridger: The Pioneering of the Immigrant Trails Across Utah, 1846-1850, Original Diaries and Journals* (1951; repr., revised by Will Bagley and Harold Schindler, Logan: Utah State University Press, 1994).

<sup>203</sup> Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, vol. 1, 237.

<sup>204</sup> For a discussion of T. H. Jefferson’s parentage see Spedden, “Who Was T.H. Jefferson?,” 2-8; Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, especially 393-694; and Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello*.

nation's third president and his slave. But, she added, "There are only a handful of white Jefferson descendants from Jefferson's daughter, Martha, who have accepted what we have said." Richardson acknowledges that T. H. Jefferson's life and lineage remain wrapped in mystery and debate: "The entire thing has been a controversy since 1802 and it continues to be a controversy."<sup>205</sup>

This black overland emigrant and extraordinary mapmaker was born in Virginia circa 1790 to Sally Hemings on Jefferson's plantation. He was an educated man and a skilled cartographer who was born in Virginia. He, like many of Jefferson's other slaves, received a sound education with perhaps his father as teacher in the essentials of music and cartography. He also may have had a nautical background.<sup>206</sup>

In 1806, T. H. Jefferson married Jemima Price, a Virginia slave who was owned by farmer Drury Woodson of Cumberland County, Virginia. Jemima lived with her mother, Hannah, and sister, Fanny. Their owner relocated with them to Greenbriar County, Virginia, where T. H. Jefferson (called Tom Woodson) lived on property (owned by planter James Kincaid) that adjoined the Woodson place. John Woodson had inherited Hannah, Fanny, and Jemima in 1788 upon the death of Drury Woodson. He had taken them to Kentucky, where he manumitted Hannah (1803) and Fanny (1805). No manumission papers were filed for Jemima, but it appears she lived as a free woman.<sup>207</sup>

The record is unclear about T. H. Jefferson's legal status and about how he left Virginia. Oral tradition of the Hemings-Jefferson descendants claims that he left Monticello after a quarrel

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<sup>205</sup> Constance Moore Richardson, telephone interview with Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, September 11, 2009. (hereafter cited as Richardson Telephone Interview).

<sup>206</sup> Spedden, "Who Was T. H. Jefferson?," 2; Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, especially 322, 384-385, 478-479; 730-731, n. 20. For speculation on T. H. Jefferson's nautical background, see Korns, "West from Fort Bridger," 177.

<sup>207</sup> Byron W. Woodson, Sr., *A President in the Family: Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and Thomas Woodson* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001), 61-63.

with Thomas Jefferson, who banished him to the Virginia plantation of John Woodson. Another family theory holds that Jefferson gave T. H. money to leave the state. But in 1807, T. H. Jefferson resided in Greenbriar County, Virginia, where he and Jemima lived as a married couple. Their first son, Lewis, was born in 1806.<sup>208</sup> In late 1820 or early 1821, the couple loaded their children and possessions into wagons and headed for Ohio via the Midland Trail. Byron Woodson, a sixth-generation great-grandson of T. H. Jefferson, speculates that part of the journey may have been by water, including a ferry ride across the Ohio River, a flatboat trip down the Kanawha River, or a steamboat trip on the Ohio River to Portsmouth, at the mouth of the Scioto River. They settled in Chillicothe, Ohio, where they rented a farm from Thomas James, using the name Woodson.<sup>209</sup> By 1830, T. H. Jefferson had bought land in nearby Jackson County, Ohio, and by 1830 or 1831 “he and a few others had established Berlin Crossroads,” a thriving community in Jackson County.<sup>210</sup>

In 1846, T. H. set out on his overland journey to California. Constance Moore Richardson speculates that he began openly using the Jefferson name after going farther west where he was unknown and his African American heritage could be downplayed. She notes, “If he did use the name Jefferson, he may have started to use the name in the West where there is less association with Sally.”<sup>211</sup> She also said that the black descendants of the president knew that T. H. Jefferson “went West, but [we] never associated *why* he went out West.”<sup>212</sup>

After being outfitted in St. Louis, T. H. Jefferson jumped off from Independence, Missouri. The *Missouri Republican* reprinted a report from a late issue of the Independence

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>210</sup> Richardson Telephone Interview.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. For departure of T. H. Jefferson from Missouri, see *Jefferson Inquirer*, May 13, 1846. This quotes a late issue of the Independence *Western Expositor*, which lists Jefferson among “those going out” West. See also Korns, “West from Fort Bridger,” 177-178.

*Western Expositor* that said, “We notice among those going out to California, Wm. H. Russell, Dr. Snyder, Mr. Grayson, Mr. M’Kinstry, Mr. Newton and others from below; and Messrs. Lippincott and Jefferson from New York; and from about here ex-Gov. Boggs, Judge Morin, Rev. Mr. Dunleavy, and hosts of others.”<sup>213</sup> Dale Morgan has speculated that no mention can be found of Jefferson in overland narratives because he left his original party (led by William Russell, founder of the Pony Express) and joined another group shortly after setting out. Before reaching the Kansas River, on May 19, 1846, Jefferson joined a new party led by Methodist minister James Dunleavy. The Dunleavy group had no chronicler.<sup>214</sup>

Benjamin S. Lippincott (a noted businessman, politician, and signatory to the 1849 California Constitution) was with Jefferson when he left New York. Lippincott’s letter to a friend, in which he describes his trip across the plains, provides an intriguing detail concerning Jefferson’s split from the 69-wagon train. Families made up most of the company, and Jefferson was one of but six single men in the party. Lippincott wrote, “Edwin Bryant Esqr., cousin of W. C. Bryant, R. T. Jacobs, son of wealthy John J. Jacobs, Louisville, & Col R. formed one mess [a group that shares meals] of the bachelors. Francis Powers Esqr. of Boston, Jefferson with whom I left New York, & myself the other.” But, he continued, “after three days journey we kicked Jefferson out of the company which I never regretted afterward, although at the time inclined to stay with the man.”<sup>215</sup>

The reasons why Jefferson left the first company are unknown. However, he began mapping the California Trail as soon as they set out, immediately putting his cartographic skills

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<sup>213</sup> Newspaper item quoted in Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, vol. 2, 518.

<sup>214</sup> Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, vol. 1, 238; Korn, “West from Fort Bridger,” 181.

<sup>215</sup> Benjamin S. Lippincott to John L. Stephens, Esqr., Feby. 6, 1847, Ciudad de los Angelos.” The letter is in the online archive “Familytales,” [http://www.familytales.org/dbDisplay.php?id=ltr\\_bs1838&person=bsl](http://www.familytales.org/dbDisplay.php?id=ltr_bs1838&person=bsl) [accessed July 4, 2011]. For the original letter, see Benjamin S. Lippincott letters: ALS, 1847-1851, BANC MSS 95/15 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Also see Bill Coate, “Jim Savage Revisited,” *The Madera [California] Tribune*, Tuesday, March 30, 2004, <http://www.maderatribune.com/life/lifeview.asp?c=102108> [accessed July 4, 2011].



to good use. In Part I of the map, he explains that his work “represents the emigrant road from Independence, Mo., by the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains to California. The Author was one of a party of emigrants who travelled the road with waggons, in 1846. All the streams of water and springs upon the road are delineated, also daily distances, courses and camps, made by the party.” Historian J. Roderic Korns asserts that Jefferson was “preparing not a map for a geographical society, but a guide for emigrants” who had little interest in latitude and longitude or the distance to the North Pole, but were intensely concerned with the location of the nearest watering hole or safe campground.<sup>216</sup>

The map and the 11-page *Accompaniment* meticulously calculate distances between points and counsel emigrants on travel modes and provisions. On crossing the formidable Salt Desert, west of Salt Lake City, Jefferson sternly advised, “Take a supply of water and green grass at Hope Wells. Three or four gallons of water per ox is enough. Water is more important than grass. Not more than five wagons should start upon the drive in company. Travel night and day; don’t hurry the oxen; make a regular camp about every 20 miles.” He frankly addresses the difficulties of overland travel: “The journey is not entirely a pleasure trip. It is attended with some hardships and privation.” Yet, he reassures the undoubtedly apprehensive travelers that all adversities can be overcome “by those of stout heart and good constitution. A small party (10 or 20 of the *proper* persons *properly* outfitted) might make a pleasure trip of the journey.”<sup>217</sup>

Toponymist and emigration scholar George R. Stewart has observed that T. H. Jefferson’s map is extremely “accurate, but in a practical rather than a theoretical way. He was

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<sup>216</sup> Korns, “West from Fort Bridger, 178; T. H. Jefferson, *Map and Accompaniment*.

<sup>217</sup> All quotes from T. H. Jefferson, *Map and Accompaniment*. See also Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, vol. 1, 240-242; Korns, “West from Fort Bridger,” 182.

resourceful, and meticulous of detail . . . He was independent of judgment. He took hardships as a matter of course.”<sup>218</sup>

Jefferson was also intimately familiar with the flora and fauna of the West. Stewart noted that he “gave a name to practically everything which was not already named, and even to some which were, he gave new names.” His was, for example, the first map to give the Truckee River its present name. His map preserves the “genuine oral tradition which was to survive against the nomenclature of the official cartographers.”<sup>219</sup> Francaviglia has asserted that, in the craft of cartography, “names help in the process of claiming places.”<sup>220</sup> In this respect, T. H. Jefferson the mapmaker, like a number of other black overland travelers, was an outspoken proponent of western expansion. In the *Accompaniment*, Jefferson proclaimed:

This vast country is open to exploration. Small parties of horsemen can go anywhere. Government should at once dispatch a dozen exploring parties in different directions. The best road should be found speedily. Trappers, and emigrants with women and babies, have done more towards this object than government.

We want a good waggon trail across this continent and we must have one. It will not cost much to improve a few bad places, and thus create a good trail or road. At convenient distances upon this road military provision posts should be established. This journey then would become a pleasure trip. Why don't the government do something immediately that will be of practical utility to the emigrant or traveler across our own territory?<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> George R. Stewart, “An Introduction to Maps of the Emigrant Road,” in Jefferson, *Maps of the Emigrant Road* (18; repr., California Historical Society: San Francisco, 1945), 7; Korn, “West From Fort Bridger,” 178.

<sup>219</sup> Stewart, “An Introduction,” viii.

<sup>220</sup> Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination*, 116.

<sup>221</sup> T. H. Jefferson, *Map and Accompaniment*. See also Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, vol. 1, 244.

Francaviglia has observed that “maps can help us understand the way in which place becomes recognized as either familiar or exotic.”<sup>222</sup> The T. H. Jefferson map can be understood in this way. Like thousands of other emigrants, black and white, Jefferson went west seeking to chart new vistas and perhaps create a new identity. He memorialized his quest in an overland map and guide that blended the emigrants’ need for security with their desire for individuality and adventure.

### **Working All the Way: Servant, Laborer, or Slave**

The men and women who ventured across the plains started out as greenhorns, but within a short time, most had received a crash course in the geography and work of the trails. Every step of the journey transformed them into seasoned veterans of the road. All overlanders were engaged in a variety of work that comprised the daily routine of the trail. Most shouldered the weight with unstinting generosity, some did so grudgingly, and others toiled without compensation or thanks.<sup>223</sup> African American emigrants, like their white counterparts, performed the tasks and chores, and often held positions of responsibility.

Historian Rudolph Lapp writes that the most common relationship of blacks to whites on the overland journey was that of “servant, laborer, or slave.” However, there were some “interesting exceptions to the relationship.”<sup>224</sup> Indeed, some white overlanders relinquished trail responsibilities to their black servants and slaves altogether. Lapp wrote that in 1849 Dr. Snelling, an emigrant from Missouri who took the Santa Fe route with his family, “had grown so dependent upon his black servants that he turned over virtually all responsibilities to them.” When Snelling’s horses stampeded on the road he, “in a highly unusual abdication of overland-

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<sup>222</sup> Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination*, xvi.

<sup>223</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 140-149.

<sup>224</sup> Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 33.

journey duties . . . left the entire matter to his black man Tom.”<sup>225</sup> In these situations, slaves were required to do their owners’ bidding as unpaid and usually unacknowledged laborers.

### **Working All the Way: Mountain Men, Pilots, and Guides**

In the first years of the great migration, emigrants placed considerable value on seasoned trail travelers. In the early 1840s, experienced guides, scouts, and interpreters were in demand.<sup>226</sup> African Americans sometimes filled these roles. James Beckwourth was a legendary mountain man who turned to guiding wagons when the fur trade began to wane. Beckwourth’s fame as a mountain man and explorer had been established long before the first emigrant wagons lumbered over the plains. His knowledge of the West made him a much sought-after wagon guide for the overland trade. The era of emigration only enhanced his reputation as a scout, trailblazer, and entrepreneur. (see Appendix, Chapter 3, Photo 1).

Born in 1797 or 1798 in Frederick County, Virginia, Beckwourth was the son of a slave woman (known only as “Miss Kill”) and her white owner, Jennings Beckwith. James adopted a variation of his father’s surname, but also used Beckwith and Beckwoth. James Beckwourth began his western journey when his father took him to Missouri in 1810. In St. Louis, Beckwourth spent his time hunting in the outskirts of St. Louis, engaged in lead mining, and apprenticed to a blacksmith.<sup>227</sup> He ran away from his apprenticeship and later joined a trapping expedition on the Wood River. In 1824 he signed on as a “wrangler and body servant” with

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>226</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 108-110.

<sup>227</sup> National Park Service, “James P. Beckwourth, Black Mountain Man,” *Stories of Exploration, Stories to be Told: African American History in Your National Parks*, [http://www.nps.gov/untold/banners\\_and\\_backgrounds/adventurbanner/adventurestories/beckwourth.htm](http://www.nps.gov/untold/banners_and_backgrounds/adventurbanner/adventurestories/beckwourth.htm) [accessed December 19, 2008].

William Ashley's fur trapping expedition to the Rocky Mountains. Within a year he was making his living as a trapper for Ashley.<sup>228</sup>

Beckwourth would spend most of his life in the West. As a trapper, he interacted with other renowned mountain men such as Jim Bridger, Christopher "Kit" Carson, and Moses "Black" Harris. For at least two decades he traveled the mountains and plains of the West, also working as an independent trader, an employee of Bent, St. Vrain and Company at Bent's Old Fort, and for the American Fur Company.<sup>229</sup> He was at home among many American Indian nations, living and working with the Blackfoot and the Crow peoples. In 1834, the Crow Nation bestowed upon him the title "Chief of All Chiefs." While living with the Absaroka (Crow) in Montana, he wed two Indian women. Then, in 1840 he married Louisa Sandoval in Santa Fe, and in 1860 he married Elizabeth Lettbetter, an African American woman in Denver.<sup>230</sup>

Beckwourth's exploits, greatly exaggerated in his autobiography, included traveling with the Thomas Smith expedition along the Old Spanish Trail from Utah to southern California, operating Louis Vasquez's trading post at Fort Vasquez, Colorado, and fighting with the rebel forces in the Battle of Cahuenga Pass in 1845 in a failed attempt to wrest independence for California from Mexico. He moved on to New Mexico in 1847, but in 1849 was lured back to California by the gold rush.<sup>231</sup> In California Beckwourth engaged in a number of business enterprises including mining and shop-keeping. In 1850, he discovered a quicker, lower route through the Sierra Nevada (now known as Beckwourth Pass). The pass would be a portal of an emigrant route, the Beckwourth Trail (est. 1851), which split off of the Truckee Route at today's

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<sup>228</sup> National Park Service "James Beckwourth," 1; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 50; Savage, *Black Pioneers*, 11-13.

<sup>229</sup> National Park Service, "James Beckwourth"; Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 51.

<sup>230</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 50.

<sup>231</sup> James P. Beckwourth, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, As Told to Thomas D. Bonner* (1856; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972); Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 51.

Sparks, Nevada and continued into California through present-day Lassen, Plumas, Butte, and Yuba counties. (see Appendix, Chapter 3, Map 8). Beckwourth promoted this route heavily, but he overestimated the number of emigrants who would use Beckwourth Pass into California.<sup>232</sup>

In late July or early August 1851, the first wagon train rolled through Beckwourth Pass guided by its founder. Future California Poet Laureate Ina Coolbrith, a young girl in the train, described Beckwourth as “one of the most beautiful creatures that ever lived. He was rather dark and wore his hair in two long braids, twisted with colored cord that gave him a picturesque appearance.”<sup>233</sup>

By 1852 Beckwourth had established himself as a hotelkeeper and trading post operator in California, where he proclaimed his house to be the “emigrant’s landing-place.” In 1854, he told writer Thomas Bonner that his War Horse Ranch, located in present-day Sierra Valley, Plumas County, was the first one an emigrant “arrives at in the golden state, and is the only house between this point and Salt Lake.”<sup>234</sup> As typical weary emigrants straggled into his establishment, he recalled the toll the overland trail had taken on them:

Their wagon appears like a relic of the Revolution after doing hard service for the commissariat . . . The old folks are peevish and quarrelsome, the young men are so headstrong, and the small children so full of wants, and precisely at a time when every thing has given out, and they have nothing to satisfy them with.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> National Park Service, “James P. Beckwourth”; Andy Hammond and Joanne Hammond, “Mapping the Beckwourth Trail,” *Overland Journal* 12, no. 3 (1994): 15; Andy Hammond and Joanne Hammond, *Following the Beckwourth Trail: A Guide to the 1851 Emigrant Trail and to the Route Markers Placed by Trails West, Inc.* (1994; repr., self-published, 1999).

<sup>233</sup> National Park Service, “James P. Beckwourth,” 1; Elinor Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth: Black Mountain Man and War Chief of the Crows* (1972; repr., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 134-135.

<sup>234</sup> For Beckwourth’s recollections of his ranch, see Beckwourth, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 519-520. See also Wilson, *Jim Beckwourth*, 147.

<sup>235</sup> Beckwourth, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 523.

Beckwourth was proud of the fact that even though, as he told Bonner in 1854, “numbers have put up at my ranch without a morsel of food, and without a dollar in the world to procure any,” they “never were refused what they asked for at my house; and during the short space I have spent in the Valley, I have furnished provisions and other necessaries...to a very serious amount.”<sup>236</sup>

Overland emigrant Henry Taylor attested to Beckwourth’s hospitality, recalling that when his wagon company reached the ranch nearly starved in 1852, Beckwourth greeted them warmly and informed them, “Boys, I have nothing to eat, but drink all you want, only leave me enough for tomorrow, for the train will be here then, and I will have plenty.” Beckwourth then suggested, “You’re welcome to go down to the corral and kill a beef.” Taylor reported, however, “we were all too tired for anything of that kind.”<sup>237</sup>

By 1859, James Beckwourth had moved on to Colorado following the gold rush there. He crisscrossed the overland trail until he went to work as an interpreter in 1866 for the military expedition of Colonel Henry Carrington. Carrington’s company set out from Fort Laramie to establish forts along the Bozeman Trail. Beckwourth died at Fort C. F. Smith in present-day Montana, at the age of 67 or 68 and was buried on Crow Indian land.<sup>238</sup>

Moses “Black” Harris, a contemporary of Beckwourth, also became a wagon train guide as a result of changing conditions in the fur trade. (see Appendix, Chapter 3, Photo 2). Harris’s life is an enigma. He was born circa 1800, but his birthplace is unclear. He may have been born in Union City, South Carolina, or somewhere in Kentucky. His parentage and his status (slave or

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>237</sup> Henry Taylor, quoted in Hammond and Hammond, “Mapping the Beckwourth Trail,” 10.

<sup>238</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 51; National Park Service, “James P. Beckwourth,” 2.

free) are unknown as well.<sup>239</sup> His racial background, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is also uncertain. Some of his contemporaries, including Beckwourth, regarded Harris as a white man. Another contemporary, W. H. Gray, described him as a man “of medium height, black hair, black whiskers, dark brown eyes and of very dark completion.” Western artist Alfred Jacob Miller depicted Harris as the quintessential mountain man, dressed in skins and furs and having a “wiry frame, made up of bone and muscle with a face composed of tan leather and whipcord finished up with a peculiar blue black tint, as if gun powder had been burnt into his face.”<sup>240</sup> Mountain man James Clyman’s wry epitaph for his comrade seems to hint at race by alluding to

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<sup>239</sup> Dale Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (1953; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 218; McLagan, *Peculiar Paradise*, 14-15; Vern Bright, “Black Harris, Mountain Man, Teller of Tales,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (March 1951): 7.

<sup>240</sup> In his autobiography, Beckwourth describes meeting “‘two white men,’ Black Harris and my old friend Portuleuse” on a hunting and trapping expedition to the Sage River; see Beckwourth, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, 100. W. H. Gray quoted in Bright, “Black Harris, Mountain Man, Teller of Tales,” 7. For Alfred Jacob Miller’s description of Harris, see Marvin C. Ross, ed., *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), 67. Miller’s painting of Harris was part of the artist’s “Trappers,” a watercolor series done in 1837. The painting now hangs in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland. Also see Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, 218; and Bernard J. Reid, *Overland to California With the Pioneer Line: The Gold Rush Diary of Bernard J. Reid*, ed. Mary McDougall Gordon (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 195 for a brief discussion of the painting. British-born adventurer and writer George Frederick Ruxton wrote a series of highly romanticized and fanciful articles about life in the American West for *Blackwood’s Magazine* in the 1840s. In one of the articles, a contemporary of Harris claims that the mountain man, who was known for spinning tall tales, says of himself, “this niggur’s no traveler. I ar’a trapper, marm, a mountain-man.” He also refers to himself as a “coon.” Ruxton’s crude depiction of Harris as an uncouth, unlettered buffoon sharply contrasts with the literacy and eloquence demonstrated in Harris’s letter to the *Oregon Spectator* in 1846 (discussed earlier in this chapter). See George Frederick Ruxton, *Life in the Far West*, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), 7; Peltier, “Moses ‘Black’ Harris,” 106. It is possible that some black frontiersmen may have identified themselves as “white” to differentiate between Indian and non-Indian. This seems to have been the case of noted black fur trader, Indian language specialist, and prosperous Minnesota businessman George Bonga. Bonga, the son of a black father and Ojibwe mother was born in 1802 near the present-day city of Duluth. He is believed to be the first African American born in Minnesota. He was educated in Montreal, Canada and returned to Minnesota to work in the family fur business. He served as an interpreter during Indian-U.S. treaty negotiations in 1820 and 1868, worked for the American Fur Company before establishing his own trading post, and enjoyed a prosperous and lavish life in Minnesota. In 1858, Judge Charles E. Flandreau (who later served on the Minnesota Supreme Court ) spent two weeks as Bonga’s houseguest. Flandreau described him as “the blackest man I ever saw,” but reported that Bonga astonished his guests by proclaiming, “Gentlemen, I assure you that John Banfil [member of Minnesota’s first state legislature] and myself were the first two white men that ever came into this country [Minnesota].” See Katz, *The Black West*, 28-30.



the possibility that Harris's life-long wanderlust might have stemmed from his desire "for the freedom of Equal rights."<sup>241</sup>

Fluent in several Indian languages and a consummate explorer, guide and mountain man, Harris first went to the mountains as a trapper in 1822 and in 1824 joined William Ashley's expedition to the Rocky Mountains. On a trek to St. Louis in January 1827, Harris and fellow trapper William Sublette carved their names on the striking geological formation that later would be called Independence Rock. Harris may have been part of the group of trappers led by Sublette who, on July 4, 1830, bestowed the named Independence Rock on the overland trail landmark. He also was part of Sublette's party that in 1834 established Fort William, which later would become Fort Laramie, another trail milestone which emigrants described as the only civilized stop in the 800 miles between Fort Kearny, Nebraska and Fort Bridger, Wyoming.<sup>242</sup> Like T. H. Jefferson and James Beckwourth, Harris was an ardent proponent of western expansion and American settlement in Oregon.<sup>243</sup> He even volunteered to lead a "filibustering expedition" to the Oregon Country.<sup>244</sup>

Moses "Black" Harris's first interaction with westbound emigrants was as a trader transporting supplies to the annual fur traders' rendezvous in Wyoming. In 1836, he guided the

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<sup>241</sup> Clyman's tribute to Harris reads, "Here lies the bones of old Black Harris/who often traveled beyond the far west/and for the freedom of Equal rights/he crossed the snowy mountain Hights/was free and easy kind of soul/Especialy with a Belly full." See Charles L. Camp, "James Clyman: His Diaries and Reminiscences (Continued from Vol. IV, No. 2)," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (September 1925): 283.

<sup>242</sup> Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, 219; Barton H. Barbour, *Jedediah Smith: No Ordinary Mountain Man* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 91; Oregon-California Trails Association, "Virtual Tour, Independence Rock," [http://www.octa-trails.org/learn/virtual\\_trail/virtual\\_tour/independence\\_rock/index.php](http://www.octa-trails.org/learn/virtual_trail/virtual_tour/independence_rock/index.php) [accessed August 19, 2010]; Clackamas Heritage Partners, Historic Oregon City Presents: End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, "Black Pioneers and Settlers - Moses 'Black' Harris," [http://www.historicoregoncity.org/HOC/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&i](http://www.historicoregoncity.org/HOC/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&i) [accessed December 29, 2008]; Moses Mountain Man website, "Moses 'Black' Harris," <http://home.att.net/~mman/HarrisMoses.htm> [accessed December 19, 2008]; McLagan, *Peculiar Paradise*, 15; Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 502.

<sup>243</sup> Thornton Grimsley to "Honorable John Bell, Secty. Of War, 16 April 1841," in "Colonel Grimsley's Proposed Expedition to Oregon, In 1841," ed. T. C. Elliott, *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 24, no. 4 (December 1923): 434-435.

<sup>244</sup> Grimsley to Bell, 16 June 1841, "Colonel Grimsley's Proposed Expedition," 438.

Whitman-Spalding missionary party as far west as the Green River. In June 1847, a Utah-bound advance party of Mormon emigrants (George A. Smith, John Brown, Heber C. Kimball, and Orson Pratt) encountered Harris guiding an eight-man pack party from Oregon, just west of South Pass on the Dry Sandy River. The group consulted Harris about their destination in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. The mountain man informed them that the region was barren, sandy, and devoid of timber and usable vegetation.<sup>245</sup>

By 1840, Harris had turned to guiding wagons full time. In 1844 he guided one of the largest emigrant trains coming to Oregon, the Gilliam-Simmons-Bush-Ford train of nearly 700 wagons. This company also contained at least eight other African American emigrants, including George W. Bush (who served as the scout for the train), his five sons (who were free people), and Robin, Polly, and Mary Jane Holmes, the slaves of Nathaniel Ford.<sup>246</sup> Harris guided the company into Oregon's Willamette Valley in October 1844 and remained in The Dalles, Oregon, until the spring of 1845. That spring he was preparing to make another trip East when Stephen Meek, the guide of the hapless "Lost Meeks" party, urgently requested his help in rescuing his wagon train, which had lost its way after trying a new cutoff and getting stranded in the high desert of eastern Oregon. Harris collected supplies from Indians and rode to the rescue of the emigrants, guiding them safely to The Dalles of the Columbia River. In late 1846, he organized and led another successful rescue mission of a wagon train that was coming into Oregon across the Applegate Trail.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Reid, *Overland to California With the Pioneer Line*, 195; Camp, "James Clyman: His Diaries and Reminiscences (Continued)," 279; David Dary, *The Oregon Trail: An American Saga* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 120; National Park Service, *Mormon Pioneer Historic Resource Study*, (Denver: Denver Service Center, 1991), Chapter 5.

<sup>246</sup> Dary, *The Oregon Trail*, 111-115. For the Bush-Simmons party joining Gilliam, see National Park Service, "George Washington Bush and the Human Spirit."

<sup>247</sup> McLaglan, *Peculiar Paradise*, 15.

In the spring of 1847, Harris left the Willamette for St. Joseph, Missouri where he advertised his services as a guide in the *St. Joseph Gazette*. He then headed west to Fort Laramie and returned to Missouri on April 18, 1849. This time he was on his way to St. Joseph where he had contracted to serve as “pilot” for the fledgling Pioneer Lines. This was a private commercial wagon train venture that offered to transport overland passengers to California in the astonishing time of 55 to 60 days for a flat fee of \$200 (present-day equivalent of \$5,790). However, while in Independence, Harris was stricken with cholera. He died a few days later. In a letter to the editor of the *Independence Daily Union* dated May 14, 1849, Pacific Line passenger, Bernard Reid, using the pseudonym “Gerald,” noted Harris’s passing. Reid reported that three men in his [Reid’s] hotel in Independence had died in a 24-hour period, the first being “Black Harris, chosen to lead us across the Rocky Mountains.” Reid related that as the legendary mountain man lay dying, he spoke of a wife and two children living in an Indian village “in the mountain fastnesses.” This statement is the only evidence that Harris had a family.<sup>248</sup>

By 1845, the demand for guides and pilots was fading, but as late as 1849, some overland trains were still employing them. A Virginia company hired the services of an unidentified black guide to take them across the plains to California. A Missouri diarist, Bennett C. Clark, noted the presence of African Americans in that company when his group “camped alongside a Virginia train” on July 27, 1849. Clark wrote that “at dark the negro guide of the Va[.] Company made the valley musical with their chearful voices—Singing the airs of our old mountain home. How rapidly the memory of other days flitted thro ones minds as we sat in the bright moon shine

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 17; Mary McDougall Gordon, “Overland to California in 1849: A Neglected Commercial Enterprise,” *Pacific Historical Review* 52, no. 1 (February 1983): 17-36. See especially 22 for Moses “Black” Harris serving as the pilot for the expedition. For the “Gerald” letter, see also Reid, *Overland to California with the Pioneer Line*, 195. A reprint of the “Gerald” letter is in Hafen, *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, vol. 4, 117.

beside our Campfire and listened to this old fashioned musick.” During the night, however, “wolves set up a rival melody which made the negroes ‘Climb down.’”<sup>249</sup>

Edmund Green, a white Michigan overlander in 1849, recalled that on his way to Fort Hall in Idaho, his company met a black man who was “hunting horses” who was “most familiar with this part of the country and could speak the Indian language.” Green’s company hired the man as a guide “to take them as far as Fort Hall.”<sup>250</sup> At Fort Kearny in 1849, Dr. Charles Boyle encountered an experienced and cosmopolitan African American guide and interpreter. The unnamed man was born in St. Louis but was “raised among the Indians.” He was fluent in English, French, and “several other Indian languages,” and he had visited Paris. He told Boyle that “he received a pension from the government for the share he had in perpetrating an Indian treaty and was also appointed interpreter at a salary of \$300 per year.”<sup>251</sup>

In the spring of 1849, David Demarest was part of a group heading for California via the Gila route. Entries in Demarest’s diary describe an encounter with a black man, likely a runaway slave, who approached the party as they were leaving Galveston, Texas. The man offered to guide the travelers to the choicest grazing spots along the way in exchange for a place in the company. One of the members quickly accepted, and the group set off. They had traveled a short distance when the sheriff overtook them. He threatened to arrest them for aiding a fugitive slave. To avoid being thrown in a Texas jail, the men paid the sheriff a bribe of \$70 in goods and

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<sup>249</sup> For decrease in the demand for guides, see Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 110-111. Bennett C. Clark, “Diary of a Journey from Missouri to California in 1849,” ed. Ralph P. Bieber, in *Missouri Historical Review* 23, (1928): 35.

<sup>250</sup> Edmund Green, “Reminiscences of a Pioneer,” 17. Original at The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Green quoted in Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*,” 34.

<sup>251</sup> See “Dr. Charles Elisha Boyle Diary,” reprinted in the *Columbus [Ohio] Dispatch*, May 14, 1849. Also see Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 34.

money, and were then allowed to continue their trek. The fate of the African American man is not known.<sup>252</sup>

### **Working All the Way: Hunters**

Although the average wagon company “spent considerably more time hunting grass or stray oxen than game,” hunting played an important role in life on the trails. Hunting could provide a valuable source of protein on the trail and, in some cases, might make the difference between failure and survival.<sup>253</sup> African American emigrants often joined their white counterparts as hunters for the wagon trains. For example, C. C. Churchill transported nine unidentified slaves overland to California and gave them guns to assist in the hunting of the plains antelope.<sup>254</sup> Overland diarist John Minto recalled that George W. Bush’s prowess as a hunter helped sustain his company when, 600 miles from their destination, they straggled into Fort Hall, exhausted and nearly starving. Bush gave the company’s small hunting party instructions on how to forage for game in the wild terrain: “Boys you are going through a hard country. You have guns and ammunition. Take my advice: anything you see as big as a blackbird, kill it and eat it.” Minto admiringly proclaimed that “G. W. Bush [was] one of the most efficient men on the road.”<sup>255</sup>

### **Working All the Way: Interaction with Indians**

Emigrant diaries and journals are filled with stories about encounters with native peoples, but contrary to the general view of western migration, overlanders were not routinely beset by marauding and murderous bands of Indians. Trails historian Will Bagley has written, “the frontier

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<sup>252</sup> David Demarest, “Diary: and Related material of Trip in Bark, Norumbega to Galveston, Texas, Then Overland to California, Experiences in the Mines, etc.” diary entries for April 29, 1849, and April 30, 1849. The original is in The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. See also Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 33. Lapp speculated that this was a ruse concocted by the Texas “sheriff” and his black cohort to extort money from the gullible travelers.

<sup>253</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 168, 270-271

<sup>254</sup> Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 29.

<sup>255</sup> John Minto, “Reminiscences of Experiences on the Oregon Trail in 1844,” Part 2, 219, 241.

could indeed be a vicious and dangerous place, but popular culture has exaggerated the general level of violence on the trails.”<sup>256</sup> These tales often were fueled by pioneer reminiscences that had been embellished and sensationalized over time, by fictionalized and lurid newspaper accounts, and by the overlanders’ general lack of knowledge of native cultures. Historian John Unruh, Jr., has stated that between 1840 and 1860, approximately 250,000 overlanders had “worn the trails to Oregon and California so deeply that in places the ruts are still visible.” More than 40,000 Mormons traveled those trails during the same period on their way to the Salt Lake Valley. Between 1840 and 1850, Indians killed some 362 emigrants; approximately 426 Indians were killed by emigrants.<sup>257</sup> In reality, overland emigrants relied on Indians to help them negotiate the trails, secure food and supplies, and obtain treatment for illnesses and injuries.

Often, native peoples regarded blacks as just another kind of white person, and made no distinctions in their interactions with them. On the occasions when Indians attacked emigrants, they targeted blacks and whites, viewing them both, according to archeologist Todd Guenther, as “part of the Euro-American culture that was sweeping across the plains despoiling an ancient way of life and destroying everything and everyone that stood in the way.”<sup>258</sup> Sometimes, however, for a variety of reasons, Indians held African Americans in higher regard than whites. Stanislaus Lasselle, an attorney from Logansport, Indiana, who departed from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to the California gold fields via the Santa Fe-Gila Trails in 1849, witnessed the interaction between African Americans and the Indians at a Baptist mission on the Canadian River. He observed that the black minister at the mission preached to the Indians in their own

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<sup>256</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 354.

<sup>257</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 118-120, especially Table 1, “Overland Emigration to Oregon, California, Utah, 1840-48,” 119, and Table 2, “Overland Emigration to Oregon, California, Utah, 1849-60,” 120, and 156-200, especially 175-185, Table 4, “Estimated Overland Emigrants Killed by Indians, and Indians Killed by overland Emigrants, 1840-1860,” 185.

<sup>258</sup> Guenther, “Could These Bones be from a Negro?,” 49-50, 53.

language, and concluded, “Negroes are very popular and have a great deal of influence with the Indians.”<sup>259</sup>

Some Indians believed that the African Americans’ dark skin was a harbinger of good fortune, or even signified supernatural powers.<sup>260</sup> For example, the perseverant slave, Dave Boffman (mentioned earlier in this report) who was captured by Indians along the trail, experienced honorific treatment from his captors because of his dark skin. Sarah Winnemucca, a Northern Paiute who was born in 1844, recalled that when the wagons began streaming over the plains, scouts reported, “there was something among them [the newcomers] that was burning all in a blaze.” Winnemucca said that the mysterious entity “looked like a man; it had legs and hands and a head,” but “the head had quit burning and was left quite black.” She remembered, “there was the greatest excitement among my people everywhere about the men in a blazing fire.” However, she noted, these magical beings ultimately turned out to be “two negroes wearing red shirts.”<sup>261</sup>

Native peoples’ curiosity about African Americans and their skin color may have helped overland diarist Joseph Pownall’s California-bound company avoid conflict with a group of Indians they encountered en route. Pownall’s contingent of 51 men set out from Keachie, Louisiana, on March 28, 1849, traveling trails that took them across Texas and into Mexico. One of the members in the party was a black man who Pownall referred to as “our good negro comrade.” While in Mexico, the overlanders encountered a group of Apaches whom they feared had hostile intentions. Much to their surprise, however, the Indians (whom Pownall claimed were led by Chief “Mangus Colorado”) came forward “carrying a white flag & no Sooner was it

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<sup>259</sup> Lasselle, “The 1849 Diary of Stanislaus Lasselle,” entries for April 5, 1849, and April 10, 1849, 8-9.

<sup>260</sup> Millner, “York,” “York of the Corps of Discovery,” 2-25; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 48-49; Mars, “Jacob Dodson.”

<sup>261</sup> Reader, “Uncle Dave’s Story, “ Part 1; Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* (1883 repr., Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1994), 8.

perceived than answered by the elevation of a Sheepskin, which happened at the time to be the most convenient article.”<sup>262</sup> After both sides were satisfied no violence would erupt, they began to converse. Pownall noted, “What seemingly interested them the utmost, was our negro comrade as undoubtedly he was the first black man they had seen.” The Indians conducted a thorough examination of the black man’s skin, and then permitted the party to continue on their way.<sup>263</sup> A few days later, Pownall’s company saw more Indians and “our negro insisted that we get a large white flag and that he would carry it, which we did, that being a light cream cashmere shawl.” The black man carried the makeshift “Indian peace flag” until they reached San Luis Obispo, California, without further incident.<sup>264</sup>

### **Working All the Way: Grasping the Reins and Popping the Whip**

African Americans frequently served as wagon drivers in wagon companies. Overlanders placed a premium on skilled ox-drivers because more than half of the emigrants preferred to use oxen for the long trip. Unlike horses or mules, oxen were not guided by bridles, bits, or reins, but were directed by voice commands, hand signals, and prodding by the drivers, who walked alongside the animals. Mastery of these skills determined the worth of an ox-driver. Prowess at “popping the whip” was also essential in controlling and directing oxen. W. Z. Hickman, a white resident of Independence, Missouri, recalled in his 1920 history of Jackson County that during the winter in Independence, black men would “buy up beef hides and dress them . . . [and] they would cut them in the proper shape and then plait them into these whips.” In the spring, when the wagon trains were beginning to start, the men would take their whips into town and “either sell them to the merchants or to the train men direct” for the price of 50 to 75 cents each (present-day

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<sup>262</sup> John Walton Caughey, ed., *Rushing for Gold* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 27.

<sup>263</sup> Caughey, *Rushing for Gold*, 28.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, 31.



equivalent of \$14.20 to \$21.30), “according to size and quality.”<sup>265</sup> Overlanders dutifully bought them to complete their outfitting gear before they jumped off onto the trail, but few had mastered the ability to use the 10-12 foot-long rawhide whips effectively.

Tennessean Peter H. Burnett (who would become California’s first governor) set out from Missouri for Oregon with his uncle in 1843. Burnett recalled that during the journey his uncle’s wagon was destroyed by a prairie fire, much to his uncle’s distress and that of his uncle’s unnamed “faithful slave, about forty years old” who had “always driven the team and was proud of it.”<sup>266</sup> Driving could be a hard and dangerous job, as John Edwin Banks, a white overlander, revealed in a diary entry in 1849: “This morning a colored boy some nine or ten years old was driving a team when he was run over by a heavy wagon, one wheeling passing over his face, the other over his chest. He is expected to recover.” In the same entry, Banks reflected on how swiftly conditions could change on the trail, noting, “I had seen him playing in the morning; such is life.”<sup>267</sup> Such occurrences involving children, adults, wagons, and livestock happened frequently on the trek westward.

In 1849, white Kentuckian William Gill hired Vardaman Buller, a free black man from Kentucky, to drive his ox teams to California. Gold rush diarist Amos Batchelder saw “a negro teamster on the way whose perspiring face was completely whitewashed with white dust.”<sup>268</sup> In 1852, George Berryman became a wagon driver for Cincinnati emigrant John Dalton, who was

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<sup>265</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 108; Floyd Edgar Bresee, “Overland Freighting in the Platte Valley, 1850-1870,” (master’s thesis, University of Nebraska, 1937), 29; Alexander Majors, *Seventy Years on the Frontier: Alexander Majors’ Memoirs of a Lifetime on the Border* (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1893), 103; Gardner, *Wagons for the Santa Fe Trade*, 9-10; Hal Schindler, “Bullwhacking Was No Snap: Occupied Lowest Rung on the Social Ladder,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, October 29, 1995. See also Madison Berryman Moorman, *Journal of Madison Berryman Moorman, 1850-1851*, ed. Irene D. Paden (San Francisco: Westgate Press, 1948), 51. For the quote from W. Z. Hickman, see Curtis, *A Rich Heritage*, 12.

<sup>266</sup> Peter H. Burnett, *Recollections and Opinions of An Old Pioneer* (New York: D. Appleton, 1880), 18.

<sup>267</sup> John Edwin Banks, *The Buckeye Rovers in the Gold Rush: An Edition of Two Diaries*, ed. H. Lee Scamehorn, entry for July 6, 1849 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1965), digital transcription by Kay Threlkeld, National Park Service, March 2008, 18.

<sup>268</sup> Batchelder, quoted in Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 30. See also Eva Turner Clark, ed., *California Letters of William Gill* (New York: Downs Printing, 1922), 34.

heading for California. Dalton described the unusual circumstances under which Berryman obtained the job:

Just before coming to the [Ohio] River a Darkey calling himself George Berryman came to us and wished to get into our wagon & cross the River—said he was the Slave of another Negro who had bought him & promised him his freedom after working two years for him in California but slaves being high[valuable], he was about to sell him to go down South. He got into the waggon, crossed the river, and the next day commenced driving our team.<sup>269</sup>

Elizabeth Flake, a North Carolina-born slave owned by Mormons James M. and Agnes Flake, became an experienced driver on the trail. (see Appendix, Chapter 3, Photo 3). In 1848, when her owners departed Winter Quarters, Nebraska, and set out for the Salt Lake Valley, 15-year-old Elizabeth (Lizzy) accompanied them on the 1,100-mile journey, walking all the way. In 1851, Elizabeth was part of the 500-member, 150-wagon Mormon expedition from Utah Territory to Rancho San Bernardino in southern California. In addition to herding cattle, she also drove two yoke of oxen across mountains and desert to their southern California destination. On this trek, she met her future husband, Charles H. Rowan, a free black man who had crossed the plains to Utah and now was in her party driving a team and wagon to San Bernardino. Elizabeth became a free woman when she entered California. She remained in San Bernardino and eventually married Charles. Charles (who worked as a teamster and barber) and Elizabeth had three children. They became leaders of the African American community in San Bernardino, and

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<sup>269</sup> John Dalton, "Diary of John Dalton," October 23, 1926, entry for May 14, 1852, typescript, digital copy, no page, original in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. Dalton's diary entry is also reprinted in Reid, "Binding the Elephant," 292, n. 30.

were in the forefront of the fight against slavery. Elizabeth Flake Rowan died in 1903 and was buried in San Bernardino's Pioneer Cemetery.<sup>270</sup>

Green Flake, an African American convert to Mormonism, also served as a driver on the overland trail. (see Appendix, Chapter 3, Photo 4). Green, like Elizabeth, was the slave of James M. and Agnes Flake. (Green and Elizabeth were not related but individually adopted the surnames of their owners.) Shortly after converting to Mormonism in 1843, James and Agnes sold or emancipated most of their slaves, but kept Green and Elizabeth. They traveled with their owners to the Mormon settlement in Nauvoo, Illinois, that year. When Brigham Young's company started out on their western trek, James Flake dispatched his slave Green to go along and help the group reach their destination. Thus in 1847, Green Flake set out from Winter Quarters, wrangling a herd of mules and driving emigrants in his owner's "fine white mountain carriage," bound for a new home in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.<sup>271</sup>

In July, after the company had arrived at what is now the Utah-Wyoming border, Green Flake, Hark Lay, and Oscar Crosby joined an advance company to search out the Donner Party's fading 1846 track through the mountains to the Salt Lake Valley. The three black men and the rest of the party used shovels, axes, and other tools to improve the Donner trail through Echo Canyon, down Little Mountain, and through Emigration Canyon for the wagon company to

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<sup>270</sup> Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer*, 18-19; Will Bagley, "Black Youths Helped Blaze Mormon Trail," Utah History to Go, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, August 27, 2000, [http://www.historyto.go.utah.gov/salt\\_lake\\_tribune/history\\_matters/082700.html](http://www.historyto.go.utah.gov/salt_lake_tribune/history_matters/082700.html) [accessed August 22, 2010]. See also Nicholas R. Cataldo, "Lizzy Flake Rowan," San Bernardino: Where History and the Future Meet (City of San Bernardino: 1998), [http://www.ci.san-bernardino.ca.us/about/history/lizzy\\_flake\\_rowan\\_slave.asp](http://www.ci.san-bernardino.ca.us/about/history/lizzy_flake_rowan_slave.asp) [accessed August 22, 2010].

<sup>271</sup> Jane McBride Choate, "Heroes and Heroines: Green Flake—Black Pioneer," *Liahona*, June 1989, <http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vnextoid=f318118dd536c010VgnVCM1000004d8> [accessed August 23, 2008]; Miriam B. Murphy, "Those Pioneering African Americans," *Beehive History* 22, in Utah History to Go, [http://historyto.go.utah.gov/utah\\_chapters/pioneers\\_and\\_cowboys/thosepioneeringafricana](http://historyto.go.utah.gov/utah_chapters/pioneers_and_cowboys/thosepioneeringafricana) [accessed August 23, 2008]; Coleman, "Blacks in Utah History"; Margaret Blair Young, "Flake, Green (1828-1903)," The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/flake-green-1828-1903> [accessed July 24, 2008]; National Park Service, "California Pioneers of African Descent," compiled by Guy Washington, [http://home.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/discover\\_history/upload/California-Pioneers-of-African-Descent.pdf](http://home.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/discover_history/upload/California-Pioneers-of-African-Descent.pdf) [accessed July 15, 2011], 1, 52, 73, 126.

follow. Green, Lay, Crosby and several other emigrants (including Mormon elder Orson Pratt) entered the valley on July 21, 1847. In August 1847, Green drove Brigham Young back to Nebraska. In October 1848, he returned to the valley, transporting his owner and family to their new log home that he had built according to his master's orders.<sup>272</sup> Green Flake was manumitted around 1850. By 1860, he and his wife, Martha, had acquired property in Union, Utah, where he farmed and raised cattle.<sup>273</sup> Despite restrictions on the participation of black members in ordinances and leadership positions within the Church, he continued to embrace the faith.<sup>274</sup> Green Flake died in Gray's Lake, Idaho, in 1903 at the age of 76. His well-attended funeral was held in Union, Utah, where he was interred in Union Cemetery, beside his wife.<sup>275</sup>

African American emigrants also worked alongside whites tending and herding livestock on the overland trek. The animals required constant attention and herding was made even more difficult by the blinding, choking dust churned up by hundreds of wagon wheels and hoofs. Dick Rapier, a free black man who went to California during the Gold Rush era, shared herding duties with his white friend Madison Berryman Moorman. The two men drove the livestock behind the wagon train. In 1849, a black Kentuckian identified only as John earned passage to California by "cooking, barbering, and caring for the pack animals for a military unit headed west." When Bidy Mason traveled from Mississippi to Nebraska, and then to the Salt Lake Valley in 1848 with the Mississippi Mormon contingent, she was put in charge of herding cattle behind the wagons. In 1851, she joined Elizabeth Flake as a herder in the Mormon trek from Salt Lake City

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<sup>272</sup> Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer*, 4-6; Murphy, "Those Pioneering African Americans."

<sup>273</sup> Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer*, 5; Coleman, "Blacks in Utah History"; Clark, *California Letters of William Gill*, 34; Choate, "Heroes and Heroines: Green Flake—Black Pioneer"; Murphy, "Those Pioneering African Americans."

<sup>274</sup> Green Flake's letter is reprinted in Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer*, 6.

<sup>275</sup> Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer*, 6-7.

to San Bernardino. Mason performed this onerous task while caring for her three young daughters, one of whom was still nursing.<sup>276</sup>

Wagon companies placed high value on skilled animal handlers. Temperamental livestock could cause problems resulting in delay, injury, or death when eager “greenhorns,” unfamiliar with oxen and mules, attempted to handle them. African American emigrants were among those who had expertise in this field, so as a result, many worked as “cattle breakers” who habituated the animals to the yokes and the ways of the road. John Johnson Davies, an overlander to Utah in 1854, observed, “Oh yes, we had a fine time seeing the Negroes breaking the young steers for the company!” Edwin Bryant recalled that just outside Independence his wagon became mired in the mud and could not be moved until “fortunately a negro man with a well-trained yoke of oxen came down the road . . . and hitching his team to ours the wagon was immediately drawn out of the mud, and, to use a nautical expression, we were ‘set afloat’ again.”<sup>277</sup>

Twenty-year-old Southern-born Lavinia Honeyman Porter and her husband left Missouri for California in 1860. She recalled in her memoirs that when they were outfitting for the trip, her inexperienced spouse bought six young oxen that “had never been broken to the yoke.” The animals were so wild that no one was “brave enough to venture into the corral with them.” She wrote, “we soon concluded that we had six white elephants on our hands.” Their dilemma was solved when her husband “found a Negro man who agreed to break them to yoke and chain.” As

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<sup>276</sup> For quote about the black Kentuckian called John, see Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 29; see also Davies, “Historical Sketch of My Life”; and Washington, “California Pioneers of African Descent,” 73, 139-141. For Elizabeth Flake [Rowan], also see Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer*, 18-19; Bagley, “Black Youths Helped Blaze Mormon Trail,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, August 27, 2000; Cataldo, “Lizzy Flake Rowan.” For Bridget “Biddy” Mason, also see Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*; 72; and Dolores Hayden, “Biddy Mason’s Los Angeles,” *California History* 63, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 89, 148, n.18.

<sup>277</sup> Davies, “Historical Sketch of My Life”; Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California: Being the Journal of a Tour; by the Emigrant Route and South Pass of the Rocky Mountains, Across the Continent of North America, the Great Basin and Through California, 1846, 1847* (1849, repr. Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1967), 20.

the Porters and their amused neighbors looked on, the black man succeeded in the “somewhat difficult task of training that bunch of young steers.” Under his patient instruction, the animals eventually “became more amenable to yoke and chain, and sullenly submitted to be harnessed to draw the wagon.”<sup>278</sup>

In 1852 on the Platte River at the “upper ferry” (present-day Casper, Wyoming), an unnamed black man applied his stock-handling expertise to save the life of an inexperienced white emigrant in a westward-bound wagon company that was attempting to ford the river. The emigrants were required to ferry their wagons, but most of them chose to swim their stock. In their eagerness to cross the river, many of the less seasoned men waded in after their animals, and “many [were] drowned.” In a journal entry of June 22, 1852, overland emigrant John Hawkins Clark, memorialized a dramatic event in which he witnessed “one man go down.” Clark wrote that another man also would have drowned “had he not been rescued by a negro who, as he heard the cry of ‘another man drowning,’ jumped upon a big mule, and then, mule and man, over a steep bank four feet high into the foaming current.” Clark noted that the black man fought tirelessly to rescue the drowning man and preserve himself. The whirling and shifting current often “prevent[ed] the negro from making a sure grip at the unfortunate man’s head. Now he has him, now he has ‘lost his grip,’ and now he is again reaching for a sure hold, and fortunately, he has it.” After a tremendous struggle, the “mule and his rider and the half drowned man land on a sand bar half a mile below.” Following the dramatic rescue, as the black traveler resumed his business of “strapping his pack upon his mule” and made “busy getting off on his journey,” an elderly white man in the company informed him that the members of the wagon train wanted to show “their great appreciation of his heroic conduct.” Clark wrote that the crowd gave the

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<sup>278</sup> Lavinia Honeyman Porter, *By Ox Team to California: A Narrative of Crossing the Plains in 1860* (Oakland: Oakland Enquirer, 1910), 2-3.

“dusky hero . . . ‘three cheers and a tiger,’” after which “with a low bow of his wooly head the negro turned and resumed his journey toward the setting sun.”<sup>279</sup>

### **Working All the Way: Domestic Help**

African Americans also worked with whites in performing the demanding and critical day-to-day duties that life on the trail required. These mundane but crucial tasks called for cooperation, reciprocity, and patience. This was especially true since a considerable number of emigrants had no experience with basic labor or homemaking tasks. Those from middle-class backgrounds had relied on servants to perform those kinds of chores.<sup>280</sup> Lavinia Honeyman Porter explained in her memoirs, “I had been raised South of ‘Mason’s and Dixon’s line.’ My parents were well-to-do Southern people, and I had hitherto led the indolent life of the ordinary Southern girl.” Her husband, she noted, “knew nothing of manual labor.”<sup>281</sup> Catherine Haun wrote in her diary that when she and her lawyer husband left Clinton, Iowa, for California in 1849, she “had yet to make my first cup of coffee.” The Hauns had engaged the services of a cook to accompany them, but they “lost the cook in only a few days.”<sup>282</sup>

Cooks were in high demand in most wagon companies. A skilled cook could make life on the trails bearable. California-bound J. Goldsborough Bruff filled his journal with references to Andy’s culinary abilities, which appear to have been extensive. An entry on August 3, 1850,

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<sup>279</sup> All quotes from John Hawkins Clark, “Overland to the Gold Fields of California in 1852: The Journal of John Hawkins Clark, Expanded and Revised from Notes Made During the Journey,” ed. Louise Barry, *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (August 1942): 256-259, [http://www.kancoll.org/khq/1942/42\\_3\\_barry.htm](http://www.kancoll.org/khq/1942/42_3_barry.htm) [accessed July 19, 2011]. The phrase “three cheers and a tiger” refers to a congratulatory cheer dating back to at least the early nineteenth century that started with three “hurrahs.” The “tiger” came on the final “hurrah” which was more prolonged and intense than the other two. Alternately, the tiger might be a growl from the crowd that slowly rose in volume and pitch, or culminated with the shouted words “Hi, hi, hi, hullah!” See WordReference.com Language Forums, “Three Cheers and a Tiger,” <http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=1186094> [accessed July 1, 2011].

<sup>280</sup> Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), see especially Chapter 5, “Westward Ho! Women on the Overland Trail,” 98-106. See also Porter, *By Ox Team to California*, 1-2.

<sup>281</sup> Porter, *By Ox Team to California*, 1.

<sup>282</sup> Catherine Haun, “A Woman’s Trip Across the Plains in 1849,” quoted in Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, 103. Haun’s original diary is in the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

declared, “Andy, the darkee, is very kind & obliging, -- He baked me a nice little loaf of bread to-day.” A subsequent entry noted that Andy had prepared a “fine piece of venison” and, though ill, Bruff “drank some of the broth.” Later that week, he reported, “Andy made me a peach pie.”<sup>283</sup> In July 1849, Bruff recounted his chance meeting with St. Louis overlanders “Mr. [Loring] Pickering & lady,” who were traveling with a “colored man and woman” who cooked and cleaned, and who served Bruff a lunch consisting of “a nice white roll of bread, and a cup of good coffee, with *milk*.”<sup>284</sup>

In 1849, an unidentified California-bound black New Yorker joined a party of Germans who had organized their company in New York and were in need of a cook. Historian Rudolph Lapp speculates that this company may have been composed of “radical refugees from persecution in Germany, as so many were at this time.” If so, Lapp concludes, this “Negro cook was in the most congenial of company.” On June 7, 1850, Bruff encountered another California-bound party, “chiefly Germans,” who “have a New York Negro for cook; and are well armed and equipped.” In 1851, Sylvia Estes Stark’s mother, Hannah Estes, was hired to cook for her husband’s former owner Charles Leopold, who was taking a herd of cattle overland from Missouri to California.<sup>285</sup>

At times, however, even the most routine duties could have serious implications for African Americans working their way along the trail. For example, an overland emigrant recorded in his diary that an unnamed black man in his group had taken a job as servant to a “domestically troubled” white family and soon found himself in an untenable position on the California Trail. In addition to his usual tasks, the black man’s employer periodically ordered

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<sup>283</sup> Bruff, *Gold Rush Journals*, 378, 380, 381.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>285</sup> Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 26-27; Bruff, *Gold Rush Journals*, 360; Sylvia Stark Interview, Part 2. See also Octavius T. Howe, *Argonauts of '49* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), 42; Harker, “Morgan Street,” 52; Clark, *California Letters of William Gill*, 34.



him to beat his [the white man's] wife. When the company reached their destination in the mines, "the wife complained of this treatment to nearby miners, who then whipped the black man!"<sup>286</sup>

Two free black women found themselves in a desperate situation as they traveled to California via the Gila Trail in August 1849. The women—mother and daughter—had signed on as servants for an army train, but found themselves abandoned on the trail. Robert Eccleston, a California-bound Argonaut and diarist from New York who was traveling in a nearby train, encountered the "young colored woman who came near our camp, crying & imploring aid." She told him that "her mother had been beaten, & she was afraid that they would tie her up." The young black woman who was "about 18 yrs. old, of middle stature and fine figure," brought Eccleston to her mother who told him that she had "last come from the Sea Willow [perhaps in Texas], but was raised in Albermarle [Albemarle], Va." She explained that "she had talked sassy to Major Henry" but "she could not help it, as she had been used to decent treatment . . . and was as free as Major Henry was." The major had immediately expelled the two women from the company. Their "traps were all thrown out in a heap on the campground, and the Army train went on, leaving her & daughter, without provision, to the mercy either of Californians or the savages." It appears that Eccleston was moved as much by the young woman's looks as by her plight. He noted, "Her features were not African in the least. She was neatly dressed, her low neck dress showing a breast which in form would eclipse many a belle whose might have been whiter. Her waist was small & exquisite, her color was a shade darker than a mullata & but for the prejudice of color, she would be a charmer." On the other hand, he observed that the "old dame," her mother, "was different, being darker and bearing all the marks of the African race." He wrote that one of his traveling companions "offered to take one but they would not separate."

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<sup>286</sup> John Doble, *John Doble's Journal and Letters from the Mines: Mokelumne Hill, Jackson, Volcano and San Francisco, 1851-1865*, ed. Charles Camp (Denver: Old West, 1962), 115. See also Lapp's account of this incident in *Blacks in the California Gold Rush*, 27.

He “afterwards heard that Mr. Stanmore [another member of Eccleston’s party] took them under his protection.”<sup>287</sup>

African American emigrants sometimes ended their journey at one of the military forts that had been established along the trails to provide protection for overland travelers. In these outposts they served as cooks, laundresses, skilled artisans, and laborers. Charlotte Green and her husband, Dick Green, were taken as slaves to Colorado from Missouri by Charles Bent, who, along with his brother, William, and partner Ceran St. Vrain, established Bent’s Old Fort in 1833 in the present-day La Junta region. Charles would become New Mexico’s first American governor. The fort was set up to serve the Santa Fe Trail trade between Missouri and the New Mexican settlements. It provided explorers, adventurers, and the U.S. Army a place to secure supplies and livestock and make repairs on wagons and equipment. The fort also served as a trading depot for the local Indians and became a welcome stopover for travelers.<sup>288</sup>

Charlotte Green gained widespread acclaim for her cooking at Bent’s Old Fort. Her buffalo stews, assorted vegetables, and pastries were renowned throughout the southern Rocky Mountains. In addition to her culinary skills, she was an accomplished dancer in great demand at parties and “fandangos.” She explained that her popularity stemmed from the fact that she was “de only female lady in de whole dam Injun country.”<sup>289</sup> Her husband, Dick, described as a “large black man,” served the fort as a blacksmith, turning out shoes for the animals and equipment necessary for the maintenance of the fort and for overland travel. Dick’s brother, Andrew, also worked as a cook and blacksmith’s assistant at the fort before gaining his freedom.

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<sup>287</sup> 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.

<sup>288</sup> National Park Service, “Bent’s Old Fort National Historic Site: History & Culture” (National Park Service: U.S. Department of the Interior, February 22, 2007), <http://www.nps.gov/beol/historyculture/index.htm> [accessed August 28, 2010]; William W. Gwaltney, “Beyond the Pale: African-Americans in the Fur Trade West,” <http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/FURTRADE.HTM> [accessed September 11, 2009], originally published in *Lest We Forget* (Trotwood, Ohio: LWF Publications, January 1995).

<sup>289</sup> Charlotte Green quoted in Gwaltney, “Beyond the Pale: African-Americans in the Fur Trade West.”

By 1848, Andrew was listed as a “Bent Company Trader” on an official license.<sup>290</sup> In 1847, Dick Green fought with the American forces against the Mexican and Pueblo Indian uprising in which Charles Bent was killed. William Bent rewarded Dick for his efforts in quelling the rebellion by manumitting him and his wife. Dick and Charlotte Green later returned to Missouri.<sup>291</sup>

### **The Nomadic Community of the Trail: The Need for Security**

Public historian Robert W. Carter has noted that the thing that kept the “emigrants alive and moving” was not merely “their will to survive, but their mutual support and willingness to work together as a community.” In 1849, Gus Blair observed the disparate composition of the travelers who set out for the West. He wrote a friend, “It is amusing to see what a heterogeneous mass of human beings are going to California, old and young, rich and poor, christian and infidel, black and white, bond and free, all alike infected with the mania for gold.”<sup>292</sup> Out of necessity, therefore, western emigrants formed a “nomadic community of the overland trail,” who organized “under the need for mutual assistance.”<sup>293</sup>

No responsibility was more important in the overland companies than that of security, and African Americans shared these duties with whites. Alvin Coffey was part of the night watch in the Bassett train. Coffey’s descendant, Jeannette Molson, noted in a 2009 interview that “he stood watch, you know, at night, alternating with some of the other hands that were on the trail, so I think to some degree he was treated pretty much as an equal.”<sup>294</sup> Similarly, the unidentified slave of white emigrant John Durivage stood guard duty to “prevent thievery by local Mexicans on the Gila Trail to the gold fields.” A black emigrant, identified only as “Black Bob,” shared

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>291</sup> Gwaltney, “Beyond the Pale,” 2.

<sup>292</sup> Gus Blair to Dr. Sir, July 13, 1849. Blair’s letter was published in *The Fort Des Moines Star*, November 2, 1849. Thanks to Will Bagley for sharing this with me.

<sup>293</sup> Robert W. Carter, “‘Sometimes When I Hear the Winds Sigh’: Mortality on the Overland Trail,” *California History* 74, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 146. For attempting to organize a “heterogenous mass” of emigrants into a community, see Reid, *Overland to California with the Pioneer Line*, 50.

<sup>294</sup> Molson Interview, 11.

night watch with white traveler C. C. Cox, who noted in his diary that Bob, armed with a gun that misfired, nevertheless thwarted an attempted Indian raid on the company's horses.<sup>295</sup>

In 1851, Jackson Estes, the brother of Sylvia Estes Stark, performed night watch duties for his California-bound train. Sylvia recalled that her brother was "sitting out in the bright moonlight, gazing at the mounds and shadows" when "something told him to go and sit in the shade of a wagon." He had "scarcely moved from his seat when an arrow whizzed past him and stuck fast in the ground where he had been sitting." After he sounded the alarm, "every man grabbed his gun, but there was not a sound, not even the howl of a coyote." Fearing that the "Indians might plan to raid the camp in the morning when the wagons were loaded and hitched, they left before dawn."<sup>296</sup>

African Americans stood shoulder to shoulder with whites, facing the dangers that were part of western settlement. Whether enslaved or free, blacks were part of the life-and-death dramas that unfolded daily. The story of Charles (Charlie) Tyler attests to this fact. Fourteen year-old Charlie accompanied his owner, Edmund Tyler, overland to El Monte in southern California after leaving Arkansas in 1852. Charlie also traveled with his 18-year-old sister, Anne Tyler. When they reached California, the two were freed. In 1860 Charlie Tyler was living in Tulare County, California. In March 1863, Charlie was working as a horse wrangler for a white family that included Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Summers, Alney McGee, and McGee's mother and young niece. Charlie and the white families were camped at Owensville near the present site of Laws, on their way from Aurora, Nevada, to Visalia, California. The family was traveling in a wagon and Charlie was mounted on horseback, herding a band of saddle and workhorses. On March 7 they discovered the stripped body of a white man who had been killed by Indians. As

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<sup>295</sup> For quotes from John Durivage and from C. C. Cox, see Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 29. See also *New Orleans Picayune*, June 17, 1849; Moorman, *Journal of Madison Berryman Moorman*, 51.

<sup>296</sup> Sylvia Stark Interview, Part 2.

the group pushed on towards Visalia, just before arriving at the present-day Tinemaha Dam on the Owens River, a party of some 100 Indians blocked their path. Charlie's group attempted to flee across the river but the wagon became stuck in the channel. Freeing the horses from the wagon, the whites mounted and made a dash for Fort Independence about 16 miles away. Charlie gave up his horse so that the women could escape, telling the retreating whites that he would catch another horse from the ramada and follow them to the fort. Charlie Tyler was never heard from again. Years later a gun, chamber emptied, was found near the site where he was last seen. It was identified as Charlie's weapon. He was presumably captured and killed.<sup>297</sup>

In 1849, white Missourian William J. Pleasants traveled to California for the first time with his father and brother from Cass County, Missouri. They were eager to get to the gold diggings. They made their way as part of a 67-wagon train that included five black men: Amos Kusick, Sam Kusick (probably the slaves of James Kusick), Old Uncle Dick Sloan (probably the slave of Robert Sloan), Emanuel (probably the slave of Middleton Story who is discussed below), and John Arnett (whose status is unknown).<sup>298</sup> Once in California, Amos Kusick was killed alongside a white miner, fending off not Indians, but thieves intent on stealing their goldfield earnings. Years later, William J. Pleasants recalled,

In September Amos Kusic, a negro, and a sailor who had been his mining partner, having between them about three thousand dollars, left Bidwell's [Bidwell Bar] at noon on their way East. After going about three miles they sat down on a divide to rest. Here they were attacked by Joaquin Murietta and his gang of outlaws. One of the men was lassoed and dragged to death, while the other was killed with a knife. When the bodies were discovered there was found a trail of blood

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<sup>297</sup> Eva L. Yancey, Laws Railroad Museum, Laws, California, "History of the McGee Family" file folder, typewritten copy, subheading "Charlie's Butte." I am indebted to Guy Washington of the National Park Service for making this information available to me. The document, part of the online AfriGeneas Genealogy and History Forum Archives, [http://www.afrigeneas.com/forum-aarchive/index\\_3//cgi?noframes;read=19359](http://www.afrigeneas.com/forum-aarchive/index_3//cgi?noframes;read=19359), was generated by Clarence Caesar, of the State of California Historic Preservation Department, Sacramento, California.

<sup>298</sup> William J. Pleasants, *Twice Across the Plains* (San Francisco: Walter N. Brunt, 1906), 21-23, 155-160.

leading away from the scene of the crime. It would seem that the negro had in some manner during the encounter come into possession of a knife belonging to one of the robbers, and had used it with deadly effect.<sup>299</sup>

The fate of the black slaves who resided at Rock Ranch in present-day Wyoming also shows the precarious nature of western settlement. In 1863, a Missouri slave-owner, fleeing the turmoil of the Civil War and attempting to keep his human property, settled at Rock Ranch, an abandoned trading post on the Oregon-California Trail a “short distance downstream” from Fort Laramie. The slave owner put his slaves to work rebuilding the outpost, hoping to take advantage of the lucrative overland trail commerce.<sup>300</sup> In a 1915 interview, Wyoming pioneer John Owens recalled that the site was rebuilt “by a fellow from Missouri, I don’t remember his name. He come up here with seven niggers that he owned and was afraid they would be taken away from him after the war so he came with them to [what is now] Wyoming.”<sup>301</sup>

In 1987, archeological and anthropological excavation crews from the University of Wyoming discovered at the Rock Ranch site “one almost complete skeleton” of a young black man and other bones thought to be from the slaves who had been brought there during the Civil War. Further tests indicated that the unnamed black settlers had been part of a deadly struggle that occurred at Rock Ranch in 1863 when an Indian attack killed most of the occupants and destroyed it as an economic site for the overland trail. The tests revealed that the most intact bones found at the site were “those of an adult, black male. He was a slightly built individual, about five feet six and one-half inches in height . . . At the time of death he was between 24 and 30 years of age.” He was in good health and “only a few minor dental problems were discernable.” He had “died violently; at least three gunshot wounds were discernable and his

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>300</sup> Guenther, “Could These Bones Be from a Negro?,” 44-48.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 43.

corpse had been chopped to pieces with an axe.”<sup>302</sup> A .44-caliber bullet was recovered from his spinal column. Tests revealed that he had been paralyzed and mutilated in the attack. The archeologists surmised that during a lull in the fighting or under cover of night, the two slaves who had managed to survive the attack dragged the body of the slain black man into the building and buried him beneath the floor.<sup>303</sup>

The experiences of Charlie Tyler, Amos Kusick, and the unnamed black man at Rock Ranch provide further evidence of the dangers that could strike western emigrants, regardless of race and irrespective of the circumstances that prompted their journey.<sup>304</sup>

### **The Nomadic Community of the Trail: Sickness, Accidents, and Acts of Kindness**

Childbirth, disease, and accidents posed greater dangers to overland emigrants than did Indian attacks. While overland mortality estimates vary, most historians have placed the number between four and six percent. John Unruh, Jr., has estimated that trail mortality was about four percent. Trails historian Merrill J. Mattes has placed the number closer to 6 percent. Whatever the actual rate, the reality was that accidents and disease posed far greater threats to emigrants than did the native populations of the West.<sup>305</sup> Based on emigrant reports of deaths caused by diseases, accidents, and violence, some historians have estimated that the number of graves averaged 10 per mile along the 2,000 miles of trail from the jumping-off places to the end of the California-Oregon trails. In 1849, California emigrant Dr. T. McCollum noted that the “road from Independence to Fort Laramie is a graveyard.”<sup>306</sup> Health, therefore, was an important

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<sup>302</sup> This is a summary of a preliminary osteological report and laboratory analyses conducted by the University of Wyoming in 1987, summarized in Guenther, “Could These Bones Be from a Negro?,” 43-44.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>305</sup> See Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 408, 516, n. 75 for a discussion of the varying estimates of overland death rates. See also Carter, “Sometimes When I Hear the Winds Sigh,” 153-154; and Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 82-88.

<sup>306</sup> For emigrant graves along the trail and the McCollum quote, see National Park Service, *Across Wyoming*, 28.

security concern for the overlanders who marshaled all available resources to combat the diseases and other maladies that plagued the trails.<sup>307</sup>

Childbirth is inherently risky, more so in the nineteenth century, and particularly for those women who went into labor amid the dirt, heat, and physical and emotional stresses of the overland journey. Journal accounts abound with mentions of mothers who were left in trailside graves after suffering complications of childbirth. Many women likely died from “childbed fever,” infection introduced by birth attendants who, ignorant of germ theory, failed to wash their hands after handling livestock, rancid meat, dirty water, “buffalo chips,” or other sources of contamination.

In an 1848 diary entry, Mormon pioneer John Brown described the conditions under which his own wife bore her child:

The [boat] . . . ran aground and stuck fast and the river was falling . . . they finally threw some 12 of the animals overboard, after which the boat floated . . . John Bankhead’s wife [gave] . . . birth to a fine son on board the boat . . . We reached the Black Hills, where we found little to feed, and our cattle began to die. Within a few miles of the La Prele River [probably La Prele River in Wyoming] my ox-wagon broke down, where it remained all night. Next morning, August 29<sup>th</sup> my wife gave birth to a fine son.<sup>308</sup>

However, experienced doctors and midwives, white or black, could ease the fears and difficulties of childbirth. Black overlander Bidy Mason learned and practiced her craft on the southern plantations where she was born and raised. Several women, both black and white, among her Mormon emigrant parties of 1848 and 1851 were pregnant at the start of their

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<sup>307</sup> Carter, “Sometimes When I Hear the Winds Sigh,” 152-154; Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 408-409; Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 363-364, 395-396. See also Clark, “Diary of a Journey from Missouri to California in 1849,” 4, 25.

<sup>308</sup> Hayden, “Bidy Mason’s Los Angeles,” 88; Brown, *Autobiography of a Pioneer*, 94, 99, 101.



journey. As a skilled midwife, Mason probably assisted in their deliveries on the trail—in addition to caring for her own children.

Edward Lee Baker, Jr., an African American who would become a sergeant in the Tenth Cavalry, Buffalo Soldiers, and receive the Congressional Medal of Honor for his valor in the Spanish American War, was the son of emigrant parents. (see Appendix, Chapter 3, Photo 5). His military records state that he had a “French father” and a mother described as “American colored.”<sup>309</sup> The couple crossed the plains on the Oregon-California Trail in a covered wagon and on December 28, 1865, Edward Lee Baker, Jr., “saw his first light of day from the bed of a freight wagon,” as his mother gave birth to him on the banks of the North Platte River in present-day Laramie County, Wyoming.<sup>310</sup>

While childbirth could be a fatal condition for emigrant women, disease accounted for nine out of every 10 deaths on the trails. Illnesses of every type crippled, maimed, and killed emigrants, regardless of race.<sup>311</sup> African American emigrants joined their white counterparts on the frontlines in the battle against the sicknesses that plagued overland companies.<sup>312</sup>

Cholera was the scourge of the trails. While this disease was familiar to most people in the nineteenth century, its cause remained a mystery. Transmitted through polluted drinking water and milk, and exacerbated by the lack of proper sanitation, cholera struck with little warning. It spread quickly and within hours of the first symptoms could be fatal. In some cases, it killed entire families and devastated wagon companies.<sup>313</sup> During the peak emigration years, as

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<sup>309</sup> Albert E. Williams, *Black Warriors: Unique Units and Individuals* (Haverford, Penn.: Infinity Publishing.com, 2003), 112; Irene Schubert and Frank N. Schubert, *On the Trail of the Buffalo Soldier II: New and Revised Biographies* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>310</sup> Guenther, “Could These Bones Be from a Negro?,” 46.

<sup>311</sup> Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 408.

<sup>312</sup> Guenther, “Could These Bones Be from a Negro?,” 50.

<sup>313</sup> See Unruh for the story reported in the *Liberty [Missouri] Weekly Tribune*, September 13, 1850, of a gold seeker who was the only surviving member of his wagon train after cholera struck the company. The disheartened Argonaut abandoned his western trek and headed back east to his home state. *The Plains Across*, 124. Overlander

thousands of emigrants gathered in jumping-off places such as Independence and St. Joseph, these towns became prime breeding grounds for the disease. Cholera reached epidemic proportions between 1848 and 1855.<sup>314</sup> In 1849 Dr. Leo Twyman of Independence, Jackson County, Missouri, reported, “on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April occurred the first case of genuine Asiatic cholera in a vigorous and previously healthy negro man.” The unnamed black man was the slave of Jabez Smith, the wealthiest man and largest slaveholder (more than 500 slaves) in Jackson County. The following year, Smith lost between 100 and 200 slaves to cholera.<sup>315</sup> Cholera spread rapidly through all the towns along the Missouri River and spilled out onto the overland trails.<sup>316</sup>

Historian Rudolph Lapp states that only the few “who plunged west ahead of the crowd had a chance of escaping contact with those who were infected.” He also notes that for some unexplained reason emigrants who started out on the trails late in April or early May “had reduced chances of immunity.”<sup>317</sup> According to Lapp, four of the slaves belonging to Kentuckian C. C. Churchill died “on the plains because of their master’s late start.” Alvin Coffey’s descendant Jeannette Molson stated that in St. Joseph, before Coffey set out for California on April 2, 1849, “there were a lot of people there to see them off, but one thing they had learned

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Ezra Meeker recalled that while on the trail in 1852, the “ravages of cholera carried off thousands. One family of seven a little further down the Platte, lie all in one grave; forty-one persons of one train dead in one day and two nights tells but part of the dreadful story.” See Ezra Meeker, *The Busy Life of Eighty-Five Years of Ezra Meeker: Ventures and Adventures* (Seattle: self published, 1916), 295. John Hawkins Clark recorded his meeting with three overlanders who were “returning to the states” after a disastrous encounter with the disease. Clark’s journal entry for June 7, 1852 noted, “the three are all that are left out of a total company of seventeen men who left Ash Hollow [on the south side of the North Platte River in Nebraska] a few days ago, bound for California. Sickness commenced soon after leaving the Hollow, and by the time Fort Laramie was reached fourteen of their number were dead. The remaining three concluded to return. . . . The road has been thickly strewn with graves.” See Clark, “Overland to the Gold Fields,” 249.

<sup>314</sup> My discussion of cholera is indebted to Carter, “Sometimes When I Hear the Winds Sigh,” 146-148. See also, Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 124; National Park Service, “Year of Disaster: The Great St. Louis Fire and Cholera Epidemic of 1849,” [http://www.nps.gov/archive/jeff/disaster\\_year.html](http://www.nps.gov/archive/jeff/disaster_year.html) [accessed August 8, 2010]; Pleasants, *Twice Across the Plains*, 33-37.

<sup>315</sup> Annette W. Curtis, *Jackson County, Missouri in Black & White*, vol. 2: *Jabez Smith, His Slaves, Plantations, Estate, and Heirs* (Independence, Missouri: Two Trails, 1998), 1.

<sup>316</sup> Carter “Sometimes When I Hear the Winds Sigh,” 146-148; Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 124.

<sup>317</sup> Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 29.

was that there was cholera and so it was imperative that they leave, and leave quickly, once they got everything amassed together.”<sup>318</sup>

In his autobiography, Coffey recalled that when he crossed the Missouri River at Savannah Landing (Caples Landing) the first week in May, one man in his party “had cholera so bad that he was in lots of misery.” Despite the best efforts of Dr. Bassett and Coffey, “he died at 10 o’clock, and we buried him.” Coffey explained, “We got news every day that people were dying by the hundreds in St. Joe and St. Louis. It was alarming. When we hitched up and got ready to move the Dr. said ‘Boys, we’ll have to drive day and night.’”<sup>319</sup> In 1850 Finley McDiarmid, a Wisconsin emigrant to California, tersely noted in a letter to his wife: “A white woman and a colored one died yesterday of the cholera.”<sup>320</sup>

Emigrants tried a variety of methods to combat cholera while on the trail. The treatments ranged from anal injections and doses of tree bark to brandy and mustard plasters. The most common treatment consisted of a concoction of calomel, camphor, opium, and cayenne pepper. Of course, these nostrums had no effect on the disease. However, overlanders routinely boiled their drinking water to rid it of alkaline, saline, and insects, and thus inadvertently killed the cholera bacteria, which, unknown to them, was the real cause of the disease.<sup>321</sup>

African American emigrants, enslaved and free, provided nursing and medical assistance when their white counterparts could not or would not do so. Blacks often were made to attend the infected and dying. In the process, they ran the risk of exposing themselves to the disease.

California overlander George Mifflin Harker explained,

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<sup>318</sup> Molson Interview, 12.

<sup>319</sup> Alvin Coffey, “The Autobiography of Alvin A. Coffey,” *The Pioneer*, 11.

<sup>320</sup> Finley McDiarmid, letter dated June 5, 1850, quoted in Lapp, *Blacks in the California Gold Rush*, 29. For original, see Finley McDiarmid letters to his wife Constantia McDiarmid, Wiota, Lafayette County, Wis., BANC MSS C-B 605, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>321</sup> Carter, “Sometimes When I Hear the Winds Sigh,” 148.

An emigrant who falls sick, unless he has some personal friends, receives scarcely any attention . . . otherwise, he is left to die, gazing on vacancy, after having swallowed a quart or so of medicine, received from the hands of some Negro servant, who hastily throws down the cup and spoon, and rushes away, paying little or no heed to the feeble demands of the sick man.<sup>322</sup>

Cholera was not the only illness that afflicted the overlanders. A host of other maladies, including tick-borne diseases, could make the long journey miserable and even deadly. Often it is impossible to determine, so long after the fact and from the vague descriptions provided in emigrant journals, exactly what caused a particular illness and death. For example, a Cherokee emigrant to California, John Lowery Brown, wrote in his journal on September 11, 1849, that “Jonas (a black Boy) in my mess very sick.” Lowery did not mention what had made Jonas ill, but a day later when the company had a “Lay Bye” [stopover] “on account of Sickness” near the “Peak of the Siera Nevada Mountains,” Lowery wrote, “Jonas not expected to live.” On September 14, 1849, he reported, “This morning about 10 oclock Jonas died & was buried about 12 oclock.”<sup>323</sup>

J. Goldsborough Bruff, a gold prospector from St. Louis, captain of the Washington City and California Mining Association, and prolific chronicler of the overland experience, traveled in a large company, which included an African American man named Andy. Bruff relied on Andy to care for him when he was stricken with various illnesses during the journey. On July 30, 1850,

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<sup>322</sup> George Mifflin Harker, “Morgan Street to the Old Dry Diggins’, 1849,” *Missouri Historical Society* 6, no. 52, (April-June 1939): 45.

<sup>323</sup> John Lowery Brown, “Journal of John Lowery Brown of the Cherokee Nation En Route to California in 1850,” in *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 12, no. 2, ed. Muriel H. Wright (June 1934): 209.

Bruff noted that in his party, “6 of the whites (including myself) are sick.” The next day, Bruff awoke “sick and weak” somewhere near the Feather River in California.”<sup>324</sup>

African Americans performed duties that did not always involve life or death issues. Emigrants, black and white, offered and received acts of kindness and generosity on the trail and in their new western communities. George W. Bush was legendary for his selflessness on the trail and in his new home.<sup>325</sup> But he was not alone in this. The overland narrative is filled with stories of black emigrants, free and enslaved, who extended their help and compassion to their trail mates irrespective of race.

Rose Jackson was the slave of Dr. William Allen who made the overland trip to Oregon Country with his family in 1849. Her openheartedness saved the Allen family from disaster when Dr. Allen died and the family was near destitute. When the Allens left Missouri in 1849, they planned to leave their slave Rose behind because they were wary of the territory’s black exclusion laws. Rose convinced Dr. Allen to take her along. He constructed a wooden box with holes drilled in the top in which Rose was made to hide as the group lumbered across the plains from Missouri to present-day Clackamas County, Oregon. She endured sweltering heat, terrifying river crossings, and steep mountain descents in the box, and came out at night to get fresh air and stretch her muscles. Allen manumitted Rose when they reached Oregon. However,

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<sup>324</sup> J. Goldsborough Bruff, *Gold Rush, Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff, Captain, Washington City, California Mining Association, April 2, 1849-July 20, 1851*, ed. Georgia Willis Read and Ruth Gaines (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 373, 374, 380. Andy’s actions were not always benevolent. On August 11, 1850, while with Bruff’s party, he and three white men sexually assaulted an Indian woman. Bruff recorded the event in his journal: “Near sun set, Nicholas, Jas. Marshall, and Andy, rode off, to visit the indian village above. As they purchased whiskey and drink along the route, it is probable that [they] will visit the indians drunk. They returned, at night intoxicated, and tell how that they reached the village and found the males all absent, and caught a Squaw, who offered them roots, willow baskets, &c if they would not molest her, but that they successively, *did molest* her [emphasis in the original].” This quote is in Bruff, *Gold Rush, Journals*, 818. See also, Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, ““Do You Think I’ll Lug Trunks’?: African Americans in Gold Rush California,” in Kenneth N. Owens, ed., *Riches for All: The California Gold Rush and the World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 166.

<sup>325</sup> Minto, “Reminiscences of Experiences on the Oregon Trail in 1844,” part 1, 142, part 2, 212, 241; McLaglan, *A Peculiar Paradise*, 20.

he died shortly after arriving, leaving his wife and children destitute. Mrs. Allen found work as a seamstress, making about \$2 a day (present-day equivalent of \$57.90), but Rose, who agreed to stay with the widow and children that first winter, worked as a laundress earning as much as \$12 a day (present-day equivalent of \$347). She shared her income with the Allen family. After the first winter, Rose married John Jackson, another black emigrant who worked as a groom for stagecoach horses in Canemah, Oregon. The couple moved to Waldo Hills, which is located on the outskirts of Salem, and raised two children, Rose and Charles.<sup>326</sup>

Emanuel, a black man from Cass County, Missouri, was part of William J. Pleasants' company that traveled to California in 1849. While the group rolled up the Platte River Valley, about 600 miles from Cass County, William Hensley, another member of the group, died from cholera. Discouraged by this, Middleton Story and his slave Emanuel tentatively decided to go back to Cass County. Pleasants wrote in his memoirs that the men "refused to reconsider their determination and return home: so bidding them good-by, we pushed on, leaving their lone wagon standing still surrounded by a few faithful friends, yet pleading with them to remain. Finally the negro, laying the whip in Story's hand, said: 'Mid, do as you please, but no matter what your decision may be, remember I am with you. If you return, I will go back also; stay, and you will find me by your side.'" <sup>327</sup> Emanuel's declaration of unwavering friendship seems to have caused Story to change his mind and rejoin the group. Pleasants wrote, "Two comrades were once more headed for California, and from that time on until we reached our journey's end

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<sup>326</sup> Clackamas Heritage Partners, Historic Oregon City Presents: End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, "Black Pioneers and Settlers - Rose Jackson," [http://www.historicoregoncity.org/HOC/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&i](http://www.historicoregoncity.org/HOC/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&i) [accessed December 29, 2008]; Gayle Karol, "1849: Rose Jackson's Trip to Oregon in a Box," published originally in *The Oregonian*, Saturday, February 23, 2008, OregonLive.com, [http://blog.oregonlive.com/blackhistory\\_impact/print.html?entry=/2008/02/1849\\_rose\\_jacks](http://blog.oregonlive.com/blackhistory_impact/print.html?entry=/2008/02/1849_rose_jacks) [accessed December 29, 2008]. See also Martha Anderson, *Black Pioneers of the Northwest, 1800-1918* (self published), 1980.

<sup>327</sup> Pleasants, *Twice Across the Plains*, 36-38.

swerved neither to the right nor left, but kept their eyes towards the setting sun, and followed where it led until they saw it sink to rest in the mighty waters of the Pacific Ocean.”<sup>328</sup>

In 1851, Sylvia Estes Stark and her family left Missouri and settled in California after her father purchased their freedom. In an interview done in the 1920s, Sylvia recalled as a young girl hearing a white emigrant woman tell her mother about receiving help from a pair of African American overlanders. The unnamed white woman and her two small children were going to California to join her husband. Stark recalled that the woman had “joined a caravan owned by a man she knew and trusted.” However, when she rebuffed his sexual advances on the trail, he expelled the woman and her children from the train, leaving them stranded. As night approached, the woman saw two figures in the distance making their way along the trail. As they drew closer, “she saw that they were two colored men with a donkey, and all of their belongings packed on its back.” Stark said that the woman was hesitant to ask the black men for help because “in the state where she came from, they were not considered reliable.” The men were “shocked to see her plight.” The desperate woman heard them say, “‘What can we do. We haven’t enough grub for ourselves, but we can’t leave her here.’” They asked her if she could walk, and told her, “‘We’ll put the children on the donkey.’” Stark said, “by stinting themselves they managed to feed the children until they came to a settlement of white people.” The two men told the woman, “‘Now you are with your own people, they can look after you.’” They left her there and continued on their way.<sup>329</sup>

African Americans were essential members of the wagon train communities that streamed across the plains. Like their white trail mates, they worked all the way, often paying for their passage with blood, sweat, and tears. They did their part and shared in the hardships of the

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>329</sup> Sylvia Stark Interview, Part 2.

journey. The long, weary months of travel tested everyone's endurance and patience, but a successful trip required cooperation. On the trail, cooperation sometimes found expression in acts of selflessness and acts of kindness that occasionally transcended racial divisions.



## CHAPTER 4

### SWEET FREEDOM'S PLAINS

#### A Visible Presence

The substantial presence of African Americans on the overland trails is indisputable. As noted in the preface, their participation is an important part of the story of western settlement, but the question of how many went west via the California-Oregon and Mormon trails from 1841 to 1869 is a difficult one to answer. Their numbers, like most of their names, went unnoted and unpreserved. Historians and scholars of the African American West have suggested numbers that range from approximately 7,500 to more than 15,000. John W. Ravage estimates that African Americans constituted about 1.5 to 3 percent of all nineteenth-century overlanders. The majority of these came overland on the Platte River route.<sup>330</sup> Certainly, African Americans were represented in the groups taking the southern routes, but their exact numbers also are unknown.<sup>331</sup>

California's black population was the largest in the West by far, rising from 962 in 1850 to 4,272 in 1870 (approximately one percent of the state's total population). It is estimated that some 3,000 blacks, both slaves and free, migrated to California during the early years of the gold rush. The 1860 census shows that the number of African Americans living in the far West (California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Washington) totaled 4,479.

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<sup>330</sup> Ravage, *Black Pioneers*, xix; Charles W. Wesley and Patricia W. Romero, *Negro Americans in The Civil War: From Slavery to Citizenship* (New York: Publishers Company, under the auspices of The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1967), 19, compiled from the 1860 Census.

<sup>331</sup> Lasselle, "The 1849 Diary of Stanislaus Lasselle," 27 n 3.

With the inclusion of Arizona, Dakota Territory, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, by 1870 that number had grown to 6,474.<sup>332</sup>

Many came as slaves whose owners were indifferent to their presence, and free blacks were similarly discounted. Despite the obvious participation of African Americans in the overland emigration, many white contemporaries tended to regard them as beneath notice or comment, stripping them of personal identity. White emigrant diarists who did acknowledge the presence of African Americans might have noted their color, gender, or age, but recorded little else about them. Certainly, information about surnames, ages, or places of origin was rare. African American emigrants with higher historical visibility often traveled with other blacks who were identified only by first name, gender, or skin color. Mississippi slave Bridgett “Biddy” Mason (whose full story will be told later) traveled from Mississippi to California with another enslaved woman named Hannah. Hannah was described by the Los Angeles *Star* newspaper as Mason’s sister, but their true relationship is unclear. The unidentified reporter who covered Mason’s case for the *Star* wrote that Hannah was “a woman nearly white, whose children are also nearly so, one of whose daughters (of eight years) cannot easily be distinguished from the white race.”<sup>333</sup>

Often, descriptions of black emigrants were limited to brief comments like the journal entry of 1849 overlander J. Goldsborough Bruff, who noted “a number of packed pedestrians

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<sup>332</sup> Jessie Carney Smith and Carrell Peterson Horton, eds., *Historical Statistics of Black America: Media to Vital Statistics*, vol. 2 (New York: Gale Research, Inc. 1995), see “Slaves and Free Blacks: Distribution, By States, 1790-1860 - I, 1844.” Smith and Horton’s figures were compiled from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*, 57, “Negro Population, Slave and Free, at Each Census by Division and States: 1790-1860.” Also see Richard White, *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 187; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 76.

<sup>333</sup> Hayden, “Biddy Mason’s Los Angeles, 1856-1891,” 90. Hayden notes that on February 2, 1856, the *Los Angeles Star* published an unsigned article, “Suit For Freedom,” that provided a complete account of the Mason case and the legal arguments supporting Judge Hayes’s decision. See Hayden, *Biddy Mason’s Los Angeles, 1856-1891*,” 148, n. 25.

(nine white and one black), and three ox wagons, passed on.”<sup>334</sup> John Lowery Brown, a Cherokee Indian, departed Stillwater, Oklahoma, on April 20, 1850, in a 10-wagon party of other Cherokee gold-seekers heading for California. He noted in his journal that “the Company was joined on a Thursday by five wagons and 21 men which [said]. . . number grew to 105 men 15 Negroes and 12 females all under the command of Clem McNair.”<sup>335</sup> Similarly, a bulletin posted at Fort Smith, Arkansas (from which hundreds of California-bound emigrants departed) announced, “Colonel Bonner’s party for California have arrived consisting of 7 whites and 6 blacks.” Another white emigrant reported, “Among the wagons that passed us was one train from Georgia, with a carriage or hack containing a man and his wife. That train also had several slaves with them.” Another merely reported that “big mule teams from Tennessee used black drivers on the way to California.” Overland emigrant Anna Maria Goodell’s terse observation in 1854 was also typical: “There is a darkey in the company.”<sup>336</sup> Unfortunately, the record is also silent about the fate of most black overlanders.

Even though many African Americans traveled as chattel property and remained invisible to their white trail mates, black and white emigrants perceived the West as a place of opportunity and possibility. However, black emigrants’ reasons for going west and their expectations of what they would find diverged in significant ways from those of whites. Freedom from the shackles of slavery, freedom from oppressive black codes and riotous mobs, and relatively more freedom from the economic and social subordination of racial prejudice were substantial reasons for many, and they risked their lives and livelihoods to achieve these goals.

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<sup>334</sup> Bruff, *Gold Rush*, 2.

<sup>335</sup> Brown, *The Journal of John Lowery Brown*, 183.

<sup>336</sup> For Fort Smith bulletin and quotes regarding the Georgia and Tennessee wagons trains, see Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 26, 27. For Fort Smith as a departure point for California-bound emigrants, see Grant Foreman, “Early Trails Through Oklahoma,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 3, no. 2 (June 1925):105-106. Goodell quoted in Guenther, “Could these Bones Be From a Negro?,” 46.

North Carolina-born Marinda Redd trekked to Spanish Fork, Utah, from North Carolina as the slave of John Hardison Redd in 1850. At the age of 20, Marinda, a “slim, happy and attractive” woman, traveled overland in a company that included five other slaves. In an 1899 editorial in the black-owned Salt Lake City *Broad Ax*, she recounted how she and the other slaves attempted to escape while en route. The editorial stated that when the group reached Kansas, “during the dark hours of the night, the majority of [the slaves] made good their escape, which was a great loss to their owner. But Mrs. Bankhead was not so successful in that direction.” She was recaptured and forced to complete her march to the Salt Lake Valley, where she became the property of a physician in Salem.<sup>337</sup>

In March 1864, Henry C. Bruce, a slave on a Missouri farm, armed himself with weapons and fled westward with his fiancée who was a slave on a neighboring farm. Bruce recalled in his 1895 autobiography that he and his future wife decided to “elope” after her owner opposed their relationship “on the ground. . .that he did not want a Negro to visit his farm who could read, because he would spoil” the other slaves. Bruce’s “almost perfect knowledge” of the surrounding countryside helped the couple evade detection as they fled along the “by-paths” on horseback. He recalled, “in great haste we started for Laclede, about thirty miles north of Brunswick, and the nearest point reached by the Hannibal and St. Joe Railroad. We avoided the main road, and made the entire trip without touching the traveled road at any point and without meeting any one and reached Laclede in safety.” From there they took a train to “St. Joe, thence to Weston.”<sup>338</sup> They crossed the Missouri River by ferry to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. After arriving in Kansas, they were married in the home of the Reverend John Turner, pastor of the local African

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<sup>337</sup> Coleman, “Blacks in Utah History.” See also Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer*, 20-26.

<sup>338</sup> All quotes are from, Henry C. Bruce, *The New Man: Twenty-Nine Years a Slave. Twenty-Nine Years a Free Man, Recollections of H.C. Bruce*, (York, Penn: P. Anstadt & Sons, 1895), 108-109. See also Katz, *The Black West*, 178-179. Katz erroneously refers to Henry C. Bruce as “Howard C. Bruce.”

Methodist Episcopal Church. They made their home in Fort Leavenworth and later Atchison, Kansas where Henry worked as a bricklayer, tried his hand at running his own businesses, made an unsuccessful bid for public office, and served for a term as an elected doorkeeper for the Kansas state senate.<sup>339</sup>

A few months after arriving in Fort Leavenworth, Bruce met a man named Bluford, an acquaintance from Salene County, Missouri, who likewise had run away. Bluford explained to Bruce that in July 1855, his “overseer got angry at [him] for some offence or neglect and attempted to flog him, but instead got flogged himself.” When Bluford’s owner tried whipping him, the black man “flogged his master and then ran away.” With a mob of angry whites in pursuit, the defiant slave managed to cross the Missouri River into another county in Missouri and slip away. Bluford told Bruce that he hid in a wheat field to await nightfall, but a white farmer discovered him, grabbed him “in the collar, and refused to let go after being warned.” Bluford slashed the man with a “butcher’s knife” and left him to die on the road. He pushed on, “[following] Grand River to its head water, which was in Iowa, then [making] his way to Des Moines, where he remained until the war.” He enlisted in the Union Army and “served to the close of the war.” After the war, Bluford made his way on foot back to Kansas, using his knowledge of maps. Bruce noted that Bluford “could read quite well. . . and had paid attention to the maps and rivers of the state of Missouri.”<sup>340</sup>

Freedom from enslavement, oppression, and racial hatred were the primary motivations for blacks to go west. However, less tangible, sometimes romanticized, and often unquantifiable

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<sup>339</sup> Henry C. Bruce and his family lived in Kansas for many years. In 1881, he moved to Washington, D.C. to work in the Post Office Department. His more famous brother, Blanche K. Bruce, U.S. Senator from Mississippi (1875-1881) and Register of the Treasury (1881-1898), secured the job for him. Henry C. Bruce and family lived and worked in Washington, D.C. until his death in 1902. See Bruce, *The New Man*, 112-113, 155-158. See also Bill Lohse, “Bruce, Henry Clay (1836-1902),” *The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/bruce-henry-clay-1836-1902> [accessed January 17, 2012]; Katz, *The Black West*, 178-179.

<sup>340</sup> For all the quotes regarding, Bluford, see Bruce, *The New Man*, 34-36. Also see Katz, *The Black West*, 178-179.

factors contributed to the allure of the West for blacks (and their white counterparts). Utopian images of unspoiled, pristine nature, unparalleled vistas, and transformative adventure also pulled them westward. Many African American emigrants crossed the plains filled with imagined possibilities of living in what historian Quintard Taylor has described as the “free air” of the West.<sup>341</sup>

### **Imagined Possibilities**

Thomas Detter, an African American barber, writer, and correspondent for two black-owned newspapers, the *San Francisco Elevator* and the *Pacific Appeal*, emigrated to California from Washington, D.C., in 1852. There he became active in the Colored Convention movement and the fight for equal rights. In 1857, he left California and eventually settled in Elko, Nevada, in 1869. His reasons for leaving California are unknown, but the failure to change the state’s anti-black laws must have been a contributing factor. In 1870, he expressed his disappointment, writing, “Little did many of us contemplate the reverses and misfortunes California had in reserve for us.” Detter traveled extensively throughout California, Nevada, Washington, and Idaho Territory, reporting on the quality of life in these areas for black people. His reports kept African Americans informed about racial and economic conditions, and often overflowed with praise for the material gains made by the black people he met. While in the booming mining town of Bannock City, Idaho (near Boise), he remarked, “I entertain a very flattering opinion of this country.” His dispatches sometime romanticized the climate and other natural phenomena in those regions. In May 1868, during a tour of mining communities after a particularly harsh winter, Detter reported to the *Elevator* from Idaho City that “mountain life” was “romantic”

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<sup>341</sup> Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle’s Central District from 1870 through the Civil Right Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 21, 22, 45.

because of the “many sudden changes requiring fortitude and strength.” He continued, “He who would succeed must not surrender, but fight the battles of life.”<sup>342</sup>

Jennie Carter, another black journalist, probably arrived in Nevada County, California, from Louisiana with her first husband, the Reverend Correll [or Corral], around 1860. She, like Detter, became a widely read correspondent for the *San Francisco Elevator*. Writing under the pseudonyms “Ann J. Trask” and “Semper Fidelis,” she turned out a series of eclectic letters covering family dynamics, community life, personal observations, politics, and race and racism. Her biographer, Eric Gardner, has noted that Carter’s work not only presents a unique gendered analysis of the black western experience, but also challenges readers to view California, the West, and ultimately America as a “space inhabited by blackness”—a blackness centered on self-definition.<sup>343</sup> Her writings acknowledged the opportunities that African Americans enjoyed in the West, but also critiqued the limitations that barred black men and women from full participation. Carter urged her readers to think of the West as a place where their motto should be “civility to all, servility to none.” In addition to her racial consciousness, she was a champion of the West’s aesthetic appeal. For example, writing in early 1869 about Sacramento after one of many floods that periodically devastated the town, she noted that “some of the company (thinking of our Granite mountains left behind,) said ‘What a sea of mud.’ Not so thought I.” Instead, she urged her readers to “labor on through all discouragements, being weak, yet fainting not by the way” and they will “have their reward, a beautiful city above the floods. And how it would gladden the hearts of their ancestors in Eastern homes to see the beautiful gardens as I saw

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<sup>342</sup> Thomas Detter, *Pacific Appeal*, November 26, 1870, and letter to the *San Francisco Elevator*, June 26, 1868, quoted in Rusco, “*Good Time Coming?*,” 10, 155-156.

<sup>343</sup> Eric Gardner, ed., *Jennie Carter: A Black Journalist of the Early West* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), ix, xxix.

them on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of January, 1869 [the sixth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation], filled with rose bushes in full bloom.”<sup>344</sup>

Famed black cartographer, lithographer, and painter Grafton Tyler Brown traveled to the West for business opportunity, but also was captivated by the region’s natural beauty. Although Brown himself was not an overlander, his artistic representations of the West contributed to its allure for many overlanders who sought greater opportunity. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 1). Art curator and Grafton Tyler Brown scholar, Lizetta LeFalle-Collins, has noted that Brown’s art “produced images that illuminate key aspects of the lure of California for African Americans and of the broader dream of the last frontier for all.”<sup>345</sup> (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 2).

Brown was born in 1841 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to free black parents, Thomas and Wilhemina Brown, who were from Maryland. Primarily a self-taught artist, he studied with German-born lithographer, C. C. Kuchel, who had worked in the lithographic business of noted Philadelphia lithographer, P. S. Duval. In 1858, at the age of 17, Brown, anxious to begin his own career, traveled steerage class on a Panama steamer to California, where he hoped to work as a lithographer and cartographer “in the booming economy based on the profits from the gold

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<sup>344</sup> “Semper Fidelis,” from Nevada County, Mud Hill, August 4, to the *San Francisco Elevator*, August 16, 1867; “Semper Fidelis,” letter from Mud Hill, Jan. 8, 1869, to *Elevator*, and January 15, 1869, in Gardner, *Jennie Carter*, 4, 55-56.

<sup>345</sup> Lizetta LeFalle-Collins, “Selling the Promise of the West,” *International Review of African American Art* 12, no. 1 (1995): 27. LeFalle-Collins notes that one of Brown’s most significant and influential commissions was his illustration of the 1865 and 1866 Washington Territory *Guide Book for the Pacific*. The frontispiece of this work contains his color lithograph of a globe centered on the page flanked by two steamships, one of which is on the sea and the other steaming towards a town on shore. In another section, Brown has placed a railroad train rounding the bend, and in another area, he depicts a stagecoach pulling away from a distant bridge. LeFalle-Collins concludes that Brown’s illustrations in the guide book, “make clear that the Pacific Northwest is accessible by all modes of transportation. . . . During this period he was as much a part of the enterprise to develop the Pacific Northwest as any other surveyor or developer.” See LeFalle-Collins, “Selling the Promise of the West,” 32. Also see Brown’s illustrated title page to Sterling M. Holdredge, *State, Territorial and Ocean Guide Book of the Pacific: Containing the Time and Distance Tables on or Connecting with the Pacific Coast and the Interior To Which Are Added Nine Large and Reliable Maps Showing Principal Towns, Routes of Communication, etc.* (San Francisco: Sterling M. Holdredge), 1866, in the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, San Francisco, <http://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~860~50032?printerFriendly> [accessed January 22, 2012].



and silver mines.”<sup>346</sup> When the nearly destitute young man arrived in Sacramento, he found a job as a waiter in the restaurant of a local hotel, but continued to refine his artistic skills. When he was 20 years old, Brown left Sacramento for San Francisco, armed with a portfolio of his work. In 1861, he went to work as an errand boy in the San Francisco lithography firm of his old mentor C. C. Kuchel. From 1861 to 1867, he worked for the firm of Kuchel and Dresel where he quickly advanced to become a sought-after lithographer. Brown produced maps of claims, city boundaries in Nevada Territory, and views of towns and ranches in the San Francisco Bay Area. These works documented the settlement and commercialization of the West. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 3). In 1867, Brown bought the business, renaming it G. T. Brown & Company. He achieved considerable success, counting large mining firms and western businessmen among his clientele.<sup>347</sup>

Grafton Tyler Brown was California’s first successful black artist. His explorations of the West took him through Washington and Oregon, where he painted majestic landscapes, towering trees, ample waterways, and diverse vegetation. Some of the subjects of his landscape and nature paintings included Mt. Rainier, Yellowstone’s Lower Falls, and Yosemite National Park. His art depicted the West as an unspoiled wilderness worthy of preservation. His paintings had the dual significance of “sharing his experiences in the wilderness and preserving the scenes

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<sup>346</sup> Lizetta LeFalle-Collins, “Visualizing California and the Pacific Northwest,” Exhibition Catalog (digital copy), California Historical Society, San Francisco, Calif. 2003, <http://www.californiahistoricalsociety.org/exhibits/gtb.html> [accessed July 14, 2011]; Douglas Frazer Fine Art, Ltd., “Biography of Grafton Tyler Brown, 1841-1918), <http://www.askart.com/AskART/artists/biography.aspx?searchtype=BIO&artist=1201> [accessed July 14, 2011]; Dr. Robert J. Chandler, “From Black to White: Lithographer and Painter Grafton Tyler Brown,” *The California Territorial Quarterly*, no. 86 (Summer 2011): 4-29; See also Lizetta LeFalle-Collins, *Visualizing California and the Pacific Northwest*; Dreck Spurlock Wilson, ed., *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary, 1856-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2004) s.v. “Grafton Tyler Brown;” LeFalle-Collins, “Selling the Promise of the West,” 26-44.

<sup>347</sup> Chandler, “From Black to White,” 14-19.

for future generations.”<sup>348</sup> Moreover, his works “embody the spirit of renewal and suggest the frontier’s promise of new beginnings.”<sup>349</sup> These themes resonated profoundly in the hearts of black overland emigrants, particularly those who had known privation and separation from family and loved ones during slavery. These intangible incentives also kept black overlanders moving along the trails, filled with great expectations.<sup>350</sup>

### **Their Expectations: Fulfilled, Disappointed, and Transformed**

Historian Delilah Beasley, who in 1919 interviewed a number of California’s black pioneers, concluded that for black men and women, the trek west became a journey to independence, dignity, and personhood.<sup>351</sup> The lyrics of a popular abolitionist hymn expressed the hopes of black emigrants, free and enslaved: “Behind I left the whips and chains, Before me was sweet Freedom’s plains.”<sup>352</sup> At the end of the journey, their expectations were fulfilled, disappointed, or transformed. Often, however, their stories were a mixture of all three of these outcomes.

For some African Americans, the first steps on the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails signaled new possibilities. A black man identified only as Lee boldly declared his intentions shortly after setting off for California on the “St. Joe Road” with his owner, William Dulany of Missouri. Lee “was heard to say that he would not work for white men much longer.” Dulany, commenting on his slave’s new attitude, declared that Lee “got too Big for his Britches as soon

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<sup>348</sup> LeFalle-Collins, “Selling the Promise of the West,” 26-44.

<sup>349</sup> Joe Louis Moore, “In Our Own Image: Black Artists in California, 1880-1970, Sample Portfolio of the Works of Grafton Tyler Brown, Sargent Claude Johnson, Emmanuel Joseph, Samella Lewis, Ruth Waddy, Emory Douglas,” in *California History* 75, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 265-271.

<sup>350</sup> LeFalle-Collins, “Selling the Promise of the West, 26-44”; Moore, “In Our Own Image,” 265-271.

<sup>351</sup> Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*, especially 69-70.

<sup>352</sup> The phrase “sweet freedom’s plains” is from the lyrics of an abolitionist song called the “Fugitive Slave,” which was included in *The Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings*, compiled by William Wells Brown in 1848, <http://www.fullbooks.com/The-Anti-Slavery-Harp.html> [accessed September 29, 2010]. See also Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 69.

as he got out of the state.” Alarmed by his human property’s boldness, Dulany sold Lee for “\$700 in gold” before they reached their destination.<sup>353</sup>

Black overlanders who went west as slaves during the Gold Rush era often were sustained by their owners’ promises of freedom in exchange for labor in the gold fields. An unidentified Louisiana slave woman, on the road to California with her owner in 1849, shared her dreams for the future with a white overlander, Joseph Warren Wood. She told him she was not free but she “soon would be if she served her master well on the road to California & 2 or 3 years after she got there.” Envisioning a day when “I shall return & claim my children that they may be free too,” she willingly trudged on.<sup>354</sup> Another white diarist wrote, “I have seen a number of slaves here in California, a large majority of whom are struggling for freedom. One of Texas who expects to free himself, wife, and three children; New York or Massachusetts he intends [as] his future home.”<sup>355</sup> Another white Forty-niner on the trail wrote, “I saw a colored man going to the land of gold prompted by the hope of redeeming his wife and seven children. Success to him. His name is James Taylor.”<sup>356</sup>

Black Missouri emigrant Peter Brown, who worked in California’s gold fields, exuded optimism when he wrote to his wife, Alley, in St. Genevieve City, Missouri, in 1851. Informing her that he was “now mining on the Cosumnes River about 25 miles from Sacramento City,” Brown proclaimed he was “doing very well.” He wrote that he had been “working for myself the last two months by paying 80 dollars a month [present-day \$2,350] and cleared three hundred dollars [present-day \$8,830] since I have been in this country.” He noted that “wages are four

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<sup>353</sup> William Dulany to Susan Dulany, May 1, 1850, in the William Henry Fields Dulany Papers, Missouri History Museum Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>354</sup> Joseph Warren Wood, “Diary, May 6 to December 10, 1849,” digital typescript, pages 1-95 transcribed by Richard L. Rieck., September 2004, pages 96-154, transcribed by Kay Threlkeld, National Park Service, May 2007, 5. Original is in the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

<sup>355</sup> Banks, “The Gold Rush Journal of John Edwin Banks, 1849,” 67.

<sup>356</sup> Banks, *Buckeye Rovers in the Gold Rush*, 5, 136. See also Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 21.

dollars a day and some diggings more. The company that I came out with are doing well and have been all summer.” Moreover, Brown declared that California was the “best country in the world to make money. This is the best place for black folks on the globe. All a man has to do, is to work, and he will make money.” (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photos 4-5). The primary reason for his enthusiasm about prospects in the West becomes clear when he reminds his wife: “I wish you to tell Peter [probably their son] to be industrious . . . I am trying to make enough money to buy him when I get home, and not to let my mother suffer for anything.”<sup>357</sup>

### **Fulfilled Expectations**

Not all black emigrants entered the West as slaves. Free black pioneers brought with them the desire to live in communities unrestricted by racial boundaries and prohibitions. For example, Richard and Mary McDonald were freed slaves from St. Joseph, Missouri. The McDonalds were in a precarious situation as free people in a slave state. They were acutely aware that the lack of citizenship prevented them from exercising control over their own lives. Though free, they were barred from voting, redressing their grievances in court, or filing a homestead claim. In addition, they ran the risk of being re-enslaved by slave hunters who preyed on free blacks. Therefore, in 1864 the McDonalds loaded all their belongings and their three children into a wagon and joined a covered wagon train heading for the newly designated Montana Territory. Upon reaching their destination, Richard bought a small tract of land on Sourdough Creek, in present-day Bozeman, and built a one-room cabin. He went to work there freighting goods from Bozeman to the boomtown of Virginia City. By the end of the decade, the

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<sup>357</sup> Peter Brown to Mrs. Alley Brown, St. Genevieve City, Missouri, December 1, 1851, original in the Oregon-California Collection, 1832-1943, Folder 14, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

McDonald family was thriving in their new home in the West. The two-story family home that Richard built from scrap materials still stands at 308 South Tracy in Bozeman, Montana.<sup>358</sup>

Nancy Lewis made her way west looking forward to life in a region that held out seemingly endless possibilities. Historian William Loren Katz has noted that she came to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in 1865 as an “attractive and vivacious teen-ager.” There she married a black Union veteran stationed at the fort, and the couple decided to strike out for Colorado. They joined the “wagon train of Sisler and Saur” bound for Denver that year, and settled there. When she was 98 years old, Nancy Lewis revealed in an interview that she had only one regret: “I can’t read nor write, and it’s my own fault.”<sup>359</sup>

The McDonalds and Nancy Lewis headed west as free black people in search of a safe place to call home. They were part of a long succession of free black emigrants who set out across the plains in pursuit of this goal. Black overlander George W. Bush had pioneered the trail some 20 years earlier. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 6).

His experiences on the trail (some of which have been discussed in previous chapters), the situations he confronted, and the choices he made offer rich insights into black emigrants’ perceptions of freedom, justice, and community. Bush was an ardent proponent of American settlement in the contested Oregon Country, and he believed that emigration was also an act of patriotism. However, the primary reason for relocating was his desire for liberty. In the slave state of Missouri he faced prejudice, violence and limited opportunities for himself and his family. Bush’s great-granddaughter Emma Belle Bush stated in a 1960 interview, “I am not sure why George came west in 1844. As far as I know, he was having a hard time in Missouri. People

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<sup>358</sup> Simon Shaw with Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, *Frontier House* (New York: Atria Books, 2002), 43; Phyllis Smith, *Bozeman and the Gallatin Valley: A History* (Essex, Conn.: Globe Pequot Press), 91-92.

<sup>359</sup> Katz, *The Black West*, 178.

would not sell him anything because they said he was a Negro. That is probably one reason why he wanted to leave there” and he was “the roving type of person.”<sup>360</sup>

Bush made the journey with his wife Isabella (who was white) and five sons as a free man but, as his trail mate John Minto noted, “it was not in the nature of things that he should be permitted to forget his color.”<sup>361</sup> Oregon Country was hostile to black emigration. In June 1844, just months before Bush arrived, the Oregon Provisional Government enacted the Black Exclusion Law. As explained earlier, the law made it illegal for African Americans to settle in Oregon Territory under penalty of 39 lashes from a whip, repeated every six months until they departed.

When Bush’s company reached The Dalles, Oregon, on the lower Columbia River, everyone in the party was welcomed —except Bush. Bush bypassed the rich Willamette Valley, where most of the whites had settled, and pushed farther north to Puget Sound. The black exclusion law did not apply there since it was limited to American settlements south of the Columbia River. In October 1845, Bush and the rest of the party (totaling five families and six single men) arrived at the Deschutes River falls. Here they established the town of New Market (later renamed Tumwater), which became the first permanent American settlement on the Puget Sound. George W. Bush built the first grist mill (1846) and saw mill (1847) and established a thriving farm on 640 acres of land now called “Bush Prairie” at the southernmost tip of the Puget Sound.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Emma Bell Bush interview by Paul Thomas, 1960, see Paul Thomas, “George Bush,” (master’s thesis, University of Washington, 1965), quoted in Darrell Millner, “George Bush of Tumwater: Founder of the First American Colony on Puget Sound,” *Columbia Magazine* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1994-95): 14-19, <http://columbia.washingtonhistory.org/anthology/settlers/georgeBush.aspx> [accessed September 21, 2010].

<sup>361</sup> Minto “Reminiscences of Experiences on the Oregon Trail in 1844,” Part 2, 212; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 82.

<sup>362</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 82; Millner, “George Bush of Tumwater,” 16-19; National Park Service, “George Washington Bush: The Spirit of Westward Expansion.”

George and Isabella Bush were renowned for extending hospitality to travelers, visitors, strangers, and needy local residents. The first years in the new country were hard and left many of Bush's friends and neighbors nearly destitute when their wheat harvest fell short. When speculators offered him an exorbitant price for his entire wheat crop, he declined saying, "I'll just keep my grain to let my neighbors who have had failures have enough to live on and for seeding their fields in the spring. They have no money to pay your fancy prices and I don't intend to see them want for anything in my power to provide them with." Despite the difficult times, the Bush homestead was also a social gathering spot for the frontier community, hosting an array of dances, parties, picnics, and holiday celebrations.<sup>363</sup>

In 1850, Bush's right to homestead was challenged by the Donation Land Claim Act, which reserved free land exclusively to white settlers. In response, the friends that Bush had helped and supported rallied to his aid. On March 18, 1854, members of the new Washington Territorial Legislature voted to send a petition to Congress asking that Bush's land claim be validated. In their petition, the lawmakers noted that he "has contributed much towards the settlement of this territory, the suffering and the needy never having applied to him in vain for succor and assistance."<sup>364</sup> On February 10, 1855, Congress passed "An Act for the Relief of George Bush, of Thurston County, Washington Territory," which confirmed his right to own the land he had homesteaded for nearly a decade. Bush was still not permitted to vote, however.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Millner, "George Bush of Tumwater"; George Washington Bush quoted in McLaglan, *A Peculiar Paradise*, 20. See also Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 336.

<sup>364</sup> Millner, "George Bush of Tumwater," 18-19.

<sup>365</sup> Millner, "George Bush of Tumwater," 18-19; "An Act for the Relief of George Bush, of Thurston County, Washington Territory," Approved February 10, 1855, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe for the Second Session, Thirty-Third Congress: Containing Speeches, Important State Papers, Laws, Etc.*, ed. Francis Preston Blair, John Cook Rives and Franklin Rives (City of Washington: The Office of John C. Rives, 1855), 418. Also see U.S. Congress, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Thirty-Third Congress, Begun and held at the City of Washington, December 4, 1854*, H.R. 707, "An act for the relief of George Bush, of Thurston county, Washington Territory" (Washington, D.C.: A.O. P. Nicholson, Printer, 1854), 299, 302, 338, 346, 352.

George Bush died in 1863 at the age of 74. Isabella passed away three years later. Historian Darrell Millner has written that if “success can be measured by the possession of material comfort, economic security and the love and respect of one’s family, neighbors and contemporaries, then George Bush was a most successful pioneer.” Just as he had managed to overcome the “physical, emotional and environmental challenges presented by the trail and the western farming frontier, Bush was able to defeat the additional societal impediments created by racism.” Overland emigrant Ezra Meeker, whom Bush befriended when he arrived in the territory in 1853, wrote, “George Bush was an outlaw but not a criminal; he was a true American and yet was without a country; he owned allegiance to the flag and yet the flag would not own him.”<sup>366</sup>

Nancy and Peter Gooch, unlike George W. Bush, went west as slaves. But their arrival in the “free state” of California strengthened their resolve to obtain liberty for themselves and the child they had left behind in bondage. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 7). Many decades passed before they could accomplish their goal. Nancy (birth surname Ross) was likely born free in Maryland circa 1811. She may have been enslaved in Missouri. Peter’s birthday is unknown, but he may have been enslaved in Georgia and brought to Missouri by William D. Gooch, who also owned Nancy. William D. Gooch, enticed by the gold rush, took the couple to California from Saint Charles County, Missouri, in 1849. They traveled overland in a covered wagon. Just three years before their departure, Nancy had given birth to their first son, Andrew on January 9, 1846. Since the child was the property of the white Gooch family who remained in Missouri, and of no use to William D. Gooch in California, Nancy and Peter were forced to leave without their son.

When California joined the union in 1850, Peter and Nancy gained freedom and began making an independent life for themselves. On January 8, 1857, they were married legally in a

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<sup>366</sup> Millner, “George Bush of Tumwater,” 18-19; Meeker, quoted in Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 336.



Methodist Episcopal ceremony at the El Dorado County home of Jacob Johnson. (Johnson, like Peter, had been a slave in St. Louis County, Missouri. He had worked in the gold mines and paid for his freedom.) Josiah Eddy performed the ceremony, and Jacob Johnson and Louis Booker were listed as witnesses on the Gooches' marriage certificate. On March 13, 1858, Peter Gooch purchased 80 acres of farmland from Johnson and his wife, Sarah, for \$1,000 (the 2009 equivalent of \$26,900). The Gooch holdings eventually grew to 320 acres and included the gold discovery site at Sutter's Mill.<sup>367</sup>

Their lives had been transformed greatly since arriving in the West, but their biggest disappointment was being unable to share their newfound happiness with their still enslaved son. The couple worked tirelessly to earn enough money to purchase his liberty. Nancy took in laundry and worked as a cook and domestic servant for miners in the gold regions of Garden Valley and Kelsey, California. Peter also worked in Garden Valley and Kelsey doing construction work and odd jobs. By 1868, Nancy had amassed the \$700 (2009 equivalent of \$10,900) needed to free Andrew. However, by that time slavery had been abolished and Andrew was a grown man. In 1870, Nancy Gooch used her hard-earned money finally to bring Andrew (who had adopted the surname Monroe), his wife, Sarah Ellen, and their sons Pearly (often spelled Pearley) and Grant to Coloma, California. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 8).

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<sup>367</sup> Washington "California Pioneers of African Descent," 89. See also Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 71. Beasley wrote that after buying his own freedom, Jacob Johnson sent a large sum of money back to Missouri to purchase his family as well, but he "never received any word from either his money or family." Also, State of California Department of Parks and Recreation, "Monroe House Site," not paginated, n. d.; Osborne West, "The Monroe Family," *Teaching Students to Read Nonfiction* (New York: Scholastic Professional Books, 2002), 86; Anthony Belli, "California Legends: Chattel Hood to Freedom – Black Pioneers Help Settle California," <http://www.legendsofamerica.com/ca-blackpioneers.html> [accessed July 9, 2008]; California State Parks, "Black Pioneer Families of Coloma: Highlighting the Gooch-Monroe Families," pamphlet printed for the Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park, Coloma, California, 2001.

Unfortunately, Peter had died in 1861, long before his efforts to reclaim his son bore fruit. Nancy died on September 17, 1901. Both are buried in the Coloma Pioneer Cemetery.<sup>368</sup>

Nelson Ray, a black emigrant from Missouri, also invested considerable time and toil to reunite his family in the West. Ray was the slave of a prominent white family in Lexington, Missouri. Upon the death of his owner in 1846, he was manumitted. He then went to work as a miner and stockman in Missouri to buy freedom for his wife, Lucinda, and three of their four children: George, 7, Nelson, 3, and Sara, 2 months. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 9). The couple's five-year-old son, Francis Marion Ray, had been sold and taken to Texas in probate proceedings when Lucinda's owner died in debt.

In 1852, seeing an opportunity to make money more quickly, Ray traveled to the California gold fields, where within a year he had earned \$3,700 by mining and working at other jobs. This money was put toward his family's purchase price. In a 1998 interview, his great-great-grandson, George Jenkins, calculated that Ray's earnings would be the 1998 equivalent of \$37,000. If measured in 2009 dollars, the amount climbs to an astonishing \$106,000.<sup>369</sup>

In 1853, at the age of 37, Ray returned to Lexington, where he worked as a drover, teamster, and freight handler for W. B. Waddell, who would later become one of the founders of the Pony Express. Waddell was a prominent and powerful Lexington businessman whose freighting company hauled goods west to Fort Bridger (in present day Wyoming), Fort Kearny in Nebraska, and all along the Santa Fe Trail. Ray also made several overland trips to California as a drover for other outfits. By 1854, he finally had accumulated enough money to free his entire

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<sup>368</sup> Washington, "California Pioneers of African Descent," 89.

<sup>369</sup> The \$108,000 estimated cost of the Ray family's freedom is based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) calculations of \$3,700 in 1852 dollars compared to the same amount in 2010 dollars. The CPI is the most useful series for comparing the cost of consumer goods and services. It can be interpreted as how much money you would need today to buy an item in the year in question if its price had changed the same percentage as the average price change. These are, however, estimates. The 2010 CPI calculations are preliminary and will be revised at least two more times this year (2011). See CPI "Measuring Worth." Also see Samuel H. Williamson and Louis P. Cain, "Measuring Slavery in \$2009," <http://www.measuringworth.com/slavery/php> [accessed July 9, 2011].

family. Wanting to ensure that his wife and children could not be re-enslaved, Nelson Ray engaged attorney Jonathan P. Bowman to submit a writ of emancipation to the Missouri court on June 9, 1854; this document legally and permanently guaranteed their freedom. Once that was settled, the Rays wanted to go west. Great-great-grandson George Jenkins noted that Waddell was Nelson Ray's "ticket back to the Golden State." The Rays "returned to California [with Nelson] driving a herd of 600 cattle as part of [a] small freight train." After stopping for a time in Sacramento, the family ended its journey in Placerville, where in 1855 they bought property. Later, Nelson and Lucinda legally married. In 1877, by a chance encounter, the couple was reunited with Francis Marion Ray, the son who had been sold away from them more than 30 years earlier.<sup>370</sup>

Perhaps no story resonates more deeply than that of Alvin Aaron Coffey, one of the best-known black overland emigrants. His aspirations were frustrated by deception and exploitation—hallmarks of chattel slavery. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 10).

Coffey was born a slave in Mason County, Kentucky, on July 14, 1822. He made three trips across the plains. The first one occurred in 1849; the next two were in 1854 and 1857. When he set out the first time, he was the slave of Dr. William Bassett of St. Joseph, Missouri, who was bound for California's gold fields. The trip separated Coffey from his pregnant wife, Mahala, who was the slave of another Missouri man. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 11).

In his first trip across the plains, Coffey performed several duties, including serving as Bassett's driver. His great-great-granddaughter, Jeannette Molson, said in a 2009 interview that her ancestor,

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<sup>370</sup> Michael Rafferty, "Nelson Ray—A Story of the West: Placerville Miner Bought His Family Out of Slavery in Missouri," *Placerville Mountain Democrat*, October 8, 1998.

did actually drive a wagon . . . There was a number of wagons that came out, so it wasn't a case where he [was] riding in his master's wagon and jumping out and doing whatever . . . He did have those kinds of responsibilities in taking care of the oxen . . . Obviously he tended the stock at night . . . so in terms of other duties that he did while he was on the [trail] I would imagine driving a wagon in and of itself had to be tough, you know.<sup>371</sup>

In his autobiography, Coffey recalled having to drive the oxen under very difficult conditions. He wrote that about two days before reaching Honey Lake (in northeastern California, on the Nobles Trail), they camped “at a place well known as Rabbit Hole Springs,” where the Nobles Trail branches off the Applegate. He recounted, “an ox had given out and was down, and not able to get up, about one hundred yards from the spring.” At night fall the exhausted animal “commenced bawling pitifully.” Coffey tried to convince his weary companions to help him “kill the ox for it is too bad to hear him bawl,” and the “wolves were eating him alive.” Coffey continued, “None would go with me, so I got two double-barreled shot-guns which were loaded. I went out where he was. The wolves were not in sight, although I could hear them. I put one of the guns about five or six inches from the ox's head and killed him with the first shot. The wolves never tackled me. I had reserved three shots in case they should.”<sup>372</sup>

His company started to trudge over the desert in the late afternoon and traveled through the night, but,

the next day it was hot and sandy . . . A great number of cattle perished before we got to Black Rock. When about fifteen miles from Black Rock, a team of four oxen was left on the road just where the oxen had died. Everything was left in the Wagon. I drove one oxen all the time and I knew about how much an ox could stand. Between nine and ten o'clock a

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<sup>371</sup> Molson Interview.

<sup>372</sup> Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*, 14.

breeze came up and the oxen threw up their heads and seemed to have new life. At noon, we drove into Black Rock.<sup>373</sup>

In addition to his other duties, Coffey was a shoemaker who used his skills to earn extra money on the trail where the rugged terrain often destroyed footwear and many migrants went barefoot. Molson explained that “he had to have learned that [shoemaking] in Missouri. Yes, but under whose tutelage? That I don’t know, so that may have been something he was doing . . . because that isn’t a trade that you just automatically pick up. You either know how to sole shoes or you don’t.”<sup>374</sup> When they arrived at the diggings in Shasta County, Coffey toiled in the mines for Bassett during the day and washed and ironed for the miners at night. His “side work” netted him about \$700 (present-day \$20,600).<sup>375</sup> He also continued his trade as a shoemaker:

He earned extra money by soling shoes, half sole and full sole. The miners would bring him so many pairs at a time, and so that’s what he would do at night, I guess, once he was off the clock with Dr. Bassett . . . I think it was just a situation where he probably had the tools and then . . . people brought their shoes and things to him, and he would do it probably on the promise ‘I’ll have your shoes ready on Saturday, or Friday.’<sup>376</sup>

He received \$18 for “half-soling a pair of boots and the miners even furnished the leather.”<sup>377</sup>

Coffey was careful to separate his earnings from the money he made for his owner. He “kept the gold he made for Dr. Bassett in one sack and the gold he received for his after-hours work in another sack.”<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*, 12. See also Coffey, “Autobiography,” *The Pioneer*, 10-13; and Alvin A. Coffey, “The Autobiography of Alvin A. Coffey,” *Overland Journal* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 64-73. Robert Clark, Don Buck, and Tom Hunt, who wrote an introduction and notes for this version of Coffey’s autobiography, point out that Coffey was mistaken about some dates, geographic details, and place names, perhaps confusing his 1849 crossing with subsequent trips.

<sup>374</sup> Molson Interview.

<sup>375</sup> Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 70. See also Jeannette L. Molson and Eual D. Blansett, Jr., *The Torturous Road to Freedom: The Life of Alvin Aaron Coffey* (Linden, Calif.: self-published, 2009), 66.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

<sup>377</sup> Molson and Blansett, *The Torturous Road to Freedom*, 66.

Alvin Coffey toiled in California “in hopes of making enough money to purchase his own freedom,” that of his wife, “my pretty Mahala,” and his children. Molson stated, “And that’s what he did. He . . . was out here for 13 months.” The first “money he was able to save, which was somewhere in the neighborhood of around \$600 to \$616, [\$17,700 to \$18,100] his master swept into his own pile and kept, so Alvin was afraid that if they went back to Missouri, via New Orleans, he might end up on the auction block.” Molson continued, “So Alvin kept his mouth shut about the fact that this man had duped him out of his money, and as it turns out when he did get back to Missouri, Dr. Bassett did sell him to Mary Tindell.”<sup>379</sup> In his autobiography, Coffey explained how his owner robbed him:

I worked thirteen months for him [Bassett] in California. I saved him \$5,500 in gold dust. I saved \$616 of my own money in gold dust. Going home in 1851 we went by the way of New Orleans. He said, ‘Let us go to the mint and have our gold coined.’ He kept my money (616 dollars) and when we got up in Missouri, he sold me for \$1,000, in this way clearing \$6,876 clear profit [present-day \$202,000].<sup>380</sup>

Coffey “thought about running away from Dr. Bassett because he knew that there were people who would protect him.” Instead, he would later recall, “I just acted peaceably and helped him about getting ready to go away.”<sup>381</sup>

In 1854, he crossed the plains for the second time, now with a new owner, bound for California. With permission from his owner, who agreed to manumit him for a fee of \$1,000 (\$26,400 in 2009 dollars), Coffey hired himself out along the way, saving “every penny he made.”<sup>382</sup> He remained in California from 1854 to 1857, working for his master and for himself

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Molson Interview, 5.

<sup>380</sup> Coffey, “Autobiography,” *The Pioneer*, 12.

<sup>381</sup> Both quotes in Molson and Blansett, *The Torturous Road to Freedom*, 66.

<sup>382</sup> Molson and Blansett, *The Torturous Road to Freedom*, 71. Molson and Blansett note that the actual fee Tindall demanded for his slave’s liberty is unclear. Different sources place it between \$1,000 and \$2,000 dollars. Molson and Blansett believe that the “price may have been only \$1,000,” 70-71.

in the Shasta mines and in the Sutter mines. By 1857, he had made enough to buy his freedom and “had accumulated approximately \$5,000 [the 2009 equivalent of \$127,000] in gold from his mining to more than pay for the freedom of his wife and children.”<sup>383</sup> That year, he traveled back to Missouri but was unable to purchase his family out of bondage immediately. His great-great-granddaughter noted that he had to wait more than two months because “it seems as if there were only two days per year when slaves could be freed legally in Missouri.” In a 1901 interview, Coffey related that Mahala and the children were waiting for him, “and you’d better believe they were glad to see me and I to find them well and sound.” Jeannette Molson recalled that he “first went to an attorney [by the name of Coombs] to make sure that everything was copacetic” and that the transaction would withstand any legal challenge.<sup>384</sup>

With that settled, the Coffey family “left Missouri forever,” sometime in mid-1857. Before returning to California, Alvin and Mahala decided to leave their two younger children (Mary J. Coffey and Lavinia Bassett Coffey) in the care of their grandmother in Ontario, Canada, then headed west overland with their three sons (John Coffey, Alvin Coffey, Jr., and Stephen Coffey). Back in California, Alvin Coffey co-founded a school for African American and Indian children in Shasta County in 1858. In 1860, he traveled to Canada (via the Isthmus of Panama) to get his daughters and take them to California. The entire family was reunited at their homestead in Red Bluff, Tehama County where he became a prosperous farmer, laundry operator, and turkey rancher. In 1887, he was inducted into the California Society of Pioneers—the only African American to earn this distinction. Alvin Aaron Coffey died in Beulah, Alameda County,

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<sup>383</sup> Molson and Blansett, *The Torturous Road to Freedom*, 74; Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*, 15.

<sup>384</sup> Molson Interview, 6. See also Molson and Blansett, *The Torturous Road to Freedom*, 72.

California on October 28, 1902 in the Beulah Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People—an institution he helped establish.<sup>385</sup>

Bridget “Biddy” Mason’s story, like that of Alvin Coffey, ultimately had a favorable outcome. However, Mason, who had been taken as a slave to California in 1851 by her Mormon owners, fought her way to freedom in the California courts. Brigham Young warned Mormon slaveholders setting out for the Golden State, “there is little doubt but [the slaves] will all be free as soon as they arrive in California.”<sup>386</sup> Biddy Mason undoubtedly hoped this was true. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 12).

In 1851, Biddy Mason and her extended family of 13 people traveled with a Mormon caravan from Salt Lake City to Southern California. On the way, she had the opportunity to talk to Charles H. Rowan, a free black man in the company (and future husband of Elizabeth Flake), who urged her to claim her freedom once she set foot in California. When her owner, Robert Marion Smith, and his slaves settled in the golden state, Mason became acquainted with other free blacks in the Southern California area, who also advised her to contest her status. Robert and Minnie Owens, former slaves from Texas who resided in Los Angeles, exerted considerable influence on Mason’s decision to seek freedom. Robert Owens, a horse and mule trader, had come overland to Los Angeles by ox team in 1850. He owned a thriving corral in Los Angeles where he and his crew of 10 Mexican *vaqueros* broke wild animals for the surrounding ranchos to sell to new settlers.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*, 15; Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 70; Molson and Blansett, *The Torturous Road to Freedom*, 79-85, especially 75-76 for a discussion of Canada. See also Jeannette Molson, “Coffey, Alvin Aaron (1822-1902),” *The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/coffey-alvin-aaron-1822-1902> [accessed July 10, 2011].

<sup>386</sup> Young, quoted in Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 79.

<sup>387</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 79-80; Hayden, “Biddy Mason’s Los Angeles,” 86-99, especially 88-90. See also Tricia Martineau Wagner, “Mason, Bridget ‘Biddy’ (1818-1891),” *The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, BlackPast.org,



Robert Owens also had a personal interest in Mason's quest for freedom: his son Charles had become romantically involved with Biddy's 17-year-old daughter Ellen. In addition, Owens's friend, Manuel Pepper, another African American cowboy, was in love with 17-year-old Ann who was the daughter of Mason's purported sister, Hannah. Both Ann and Hannah were also the slaves of Robert Marion Smith.<sup>388</sup> Mason confided to Owens that Smith was planning to take her and the rest of his slaves to Texas, where there would be no question about their status as slaves. By late 1855, Smith had already moved his household, including Mason, Hannah (who was pregnant), and the other slaves, to a remote encampment in the Santa Monica Mountains. He was preparing to depart for Texas. The Owens and the Rowans informed the Los Angeles County sheriff that slaves were being held illegally in the vicinity; a posse was assembled consisting of the sheriff, Robert Owens, Charles Owens, Manuel Pepper, and several of the *vaqueros* who worked at Owens's corral. The group made a daring surprise raid on the encampment, rescuing Mason, her family, and the other slaves. The whole group was placed under the protective custody of the Los Angeles County Sheriff until the matter could be sorted out.<sup>389</sup>

On January 19, 1856, after enduring five years of enslavement in a "free state," Biddy Mason petitioned the court for freedom on behalf of herself and the rest of her family. The case was heard in the Los Angeles District Court, with Judge Benjamin Hayes presiding. The hearing lasted three days. Because California's black laws barred African Americans from testifying in cases against whites, none of the black people could speak in open court. However, when questioned in Hayes's private chambers, Mason admitted that she would not willingly go to

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<http://www.blackpast.org/?=aaw/mason-bridget-biddy-1818-1891> [accessed July 10, 2011].

<sup>388</sup> Hayden, "Bidly Mason's Los Angeles," 89

<sup>389</sup> Hayden, "Bidly Mason's Los Angeles," 90; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 80; Wagner, "Bidly Mason."

Texas. She said, “I have always done what I have been told to do; I always feared this trip to Texas, since I first heard of it. Mr. Smith told me I would be just as free in Texas as here.”

Hannah, however, was hesitant to speak. The judge speculated that she and others may have been threatened by Smith. Hayes stated that the court had to pay attention to the “speaking silence of the petitioners.” Later in the proceedings, however, Hannah divulged that she “never wished to leave, and prays for protection.”<sup>390</sup>

On January 21, 1856, just one year before the infamous *Dred Scott* ruling, Judge Hayes handed down his decision. Citing California’s constitutional prohibition of slavery and involuntary servitude, he declared, “all of the said persons of color are entitled to their freedom and are free forever.” He added that all that “remained was . . . for the petitioners to become settled and go to work for themselves in peace and without fear.”<sup>391</sup> Bidy Mason did just that. She went on to become a prosperous and generous leader in the African American community, and a highly respected businesswoman and philanthropist in Los Angeles. She died there on January 15, 1891 and was buried in Evergreen Cemetery, in the Boyle Heights district.<sup>392</sup>

Bidy Mason’s courageous battle underscores the difficulties that black emigrants encountered as they sought freedom in the West. Her experiences also reveal the crucial role played by the free black community in assisting black newcomers. The story of overland pioneers Robin and Polly Holmes and their daughter, Mary Jane, is equally compelling; disappointment and triumph are parallel themes in their western narrative. The Holmeses became the principal players in a case that struck a major legal blow to slavery in Oregon and challenged slavery’s hold throughout the Pacific Northwest. Unlike Mason, however, the Holmeses fought for their liberty without a supportive network of black friends and neighbors.

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<sup>390</sup> All quotes in this paragraph are in Hayden, “Bidy Mason’s Los Angeles,” 91.

<sup>391</sup> Hayden, “Bidy Mason’s Los Angeles,” 91.

<sup>392</sup> Wagner, “Bidy Mason”; Hayden, “Bidy Mason’s Los Angeles,” 91-99;

Robin and Polly Holmes and Mary Jane, who was born in 1841, were taken to Oregon from Missouri in 1844 by their owner, Nathaniel Ford. Ford was the former sheriff of Howard County, Missouri, and he was heading west to escape financial difficulties. The Holmeses were members of the wagon train that carried George W. Bush and family and was led by Moses Harris. They also traveled with a black man named Scott, another slave owned by Ford, of whom very little is known. After settling in the Willamette Valley, Ford moved the Holmes family into a small cabin he had constructed for them, and allowed them (and Scott) to travel to the local market to sell the produce they had raised. Ford had promised his slaves freedom once they arrived in the new land. Yet, Ford still refused to grant them freedom.<sup>393</sup>

In the meantime, Robin and Polly had four more children in Oregon: James, born in 1845; Roxanna, in 1847; Harriet, birth date unknown; and a son, Lon, born in 1850. In 1849, when Robin Holmes asked for his freedom, Ford demanded that Robin head down to the California gold fields with Ford's son, Mark, and the slave, Scott. Ford promised to free Robin and family when he returned to Oregon and to cut him in on a share of the gold he brought back. Robin went to California, where he served as a cook for the mining camp while also working in the fields. His labor netted him \$900 worth of gold, the equivalent of \$26,100 in 2009 dollars. On the return trip to Oregon, Mark Ford and Scott were drowned. Robin made it back to Oregon, and handed over his \$900 to Ford as promised. In 1850, Ford manumitted Robin, Polly, and the baby, Lon. The Holmeses relocated to a house near Nesmith's Mills, and later to Salem, where Robin and Polly opened a small nursery and sold fruit trees and shrubs. However, Ford did not allow the other four children to leave with their parents because he planned to sell them.

While visiting her parents in 1851, Harriet died. The circumstances of her death are unknown but Robin blamed his former owner for his daughter's death. Realizing that Ford

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<sup>393</sup> McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise*, 33. Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 77.

would never free the other children, in 1852 Robin Holmes brought suit against his former owner to gain custody of his own children. Although he was uneducated, Robin Holmes knew that Oregon Territory disallowed slavery, and so he decided to press his case. At the initial hearing, Ford argued that he was the legal owner of the children and the parents. He also claimed that Roxanna, Mary Jane, and James were his wards until the girls reached the age of 18 and until James turned 21, according to an agreement he had made with Robin after his return from California. He further argued that he had expended considerable funds on the children and could sell them in Missouri to recoup his money. Finally, Ford proclaimed that the Holmes children would suffer if returned to their parents because Robin was poor, illiterate, and unfit to look after them.<sup>394</sup>

During his testimony, Robin rejected Ford's accusations and denied entering into any custody arrangement with his former owner. Judge Cyrus Olney ruled that Nathaniel Ford had to bring the children to court, where they would be held until the case was settled. Ford did not comply, but instead promised to pay Holmes a \$3,000 bond (present-day equivalent of \$85,900) to ensure that the children would not be removed from the territory. After a two-month delay in getting a key witness to testify, Robin renewed his petition to the courts, fearing the children were being mistreated. Judge Olney ordered Ford to relinquish them to the court or to the local sheriff. Ford ignored this order as well. The judge also ruled that Mary Jane could stay with Ford or go to her parents, but awarded temporary custody of Roxanna to Ford and custody of James to his father. Both men were required to post \$1,000 (present-day equivalent of \$28,600) bond to guarantee the children's appearance in court.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 34; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 77.

<sup>395</sup> McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise*, 34-35.

Robin was unable to pay the bond and became increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of the hearing. In July 1853, after 11 months of inaction, Robin Holmes took the case of *Holmes v. Ford* before Judge George A. Williams, a newly arrived justice of the Oregon Territorial Supreme Court who was also a free-soil Democrat from Iowa.<sup>396</sup> Williams quickly found in Holmes's favor. His ruling held that slavery could not exist in Oregon without specific legislation to support it. He further declared that since these "colored children are in Oregon, where slavery does not legally exist, they are free" and awarded full custody to Robin and Polly Holmes. The Holmes case represents the last attempt by proslavery emigrants to Oregon to secure their slave property through judicial means.<sup>397</sup>

The Holmes's successful challenge to their status as slaves caused Nathaniel Ford to lament ever bringing his human property overland. He wrote to his friend, James A. Shirley, in Missouri: "You know I brought some negroes with me to this country which has proved a curse to me . . . Robin and his wife done verry well until the spring of '50 when the abolitionists interfered – and the country is full of them – the interference was so great that I had to let them go." He unsuccessfully attempted to persuade Shirley to buy the family from him and return them to Missouri under the fugitive slave law: "If the case of the negroes can be attended to it will releave me and my fambly of much trouble and you may be benefitted by it."<sup>398</sup>

In 1854, after the trial was over and the family was free, a Polk County, Oregon, tax roll listed the total value of Robin Holmes's personal property at \$655 (present-day equivalent of \$17,300). His eldest daughter, Mary Jane, now also free, volunteered to remain with Nathaniel Ford to work for wages as a servant to provide income for her impoverished parents. In 1857,

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<sup>396</sup> McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise*, 33-35; Taylor, *In Search of the Western Frontier*, 77.

<sup>397</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 77.

<sup>398</sup> Nathaniel Ford to James A. Shirley, letter dated June 22, 1852, in Frederic A. Culmer, ed., "Emigrant Missourians in Mexico and Oregon," *Missouri Historical Review*, 25 (1931): 287.

when she was 16 years old, she planned to marry Reuben Shipley, a former slave born in Kentucky who had been brought to Oregon by his owner, Robert Shipley. Reuben, too, had been promised freedom. When he left Missouri with his owner, he also left a wife and two sons behind who were still enslaved on a different plantation. His wife died while he was in Oregon, and the man who owned Reuben's two sons refused to let him purchase their freedom. After gaining his freedom in Oregon sometime in the mid-1850s, Reuben had saved \$1,500 (present-day equivalent of \$38,000) from his work as a farm employee. Before he could wed Mary Jane, however, Nathaniel Ford insisted that Reuben pay him \$750 (present-day equivalent of \$19,000), even though Mary Jane had been a free woman for four years. Fearing a protracted legal fight, Reuben paid the ransom and the couple was married.<sup>399</sup>

Reuben had used some of his earnings to purchase 80 acres of farmland located between Corvallis and Philomath. It was here that he and his new wife settled. The couple had a family of three daughters and three sons. The Shipleys deeded two acres of their land to the county to serve as a cemetery, with the provision that African Americans be permitted to be interred there. In 1861, Shipley's land became Mt. Union Cemetery in Benton County, Oregon. Twelve years later Reuben and one of his daughters were buried there after succumbing to smallpox.<sup>400</sup> Mary Jane Holmes Shipley remarried in 1875 to R. G. Drake and lived in Corvallis. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 13). After R. G. Drake's death, she resided with her children, Nettie and Charles Shipley, in east Salem, then relocated to Portland. She died in 1925, and was taken back to Corvallis to be buried beside her two husbands and children in Mt. Union Cemetery.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise*, 80-81; Tricia Martineau Wagner, "Drake, Mary Jane Holmes Shipley (1841-1925)," *The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History*, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?=aaw/drake-mary-jane-holmes-shipley-1841-1925> [accessed July 25, 2008].

<sup>400</sup> McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise*, 81.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

## **Disappointed Expectations**

Many African Americans achieved a better life in the West, but not unconditionally and not without struggle. Obtaining freedom and justice was an incremental process, measured over time and through succeeding generations. This progression was influenced by a complex of racial (and gender) factors that formed the social and political culture of nineteenth century America. Despite the best efforts of some black overlanders, their goals and aspirations were frustrated, diminished, or disappointed. For them, the supposed promise of the West rang hollow.

Dave Boffman, the independent and resourceful slave who evaded slave-catchers three times and escaped Indian captivity once while on his way to California with his owner in 1851, was hard at work in the northern mines near Mokelumne Hill by October of that year. Meeting with some success, Boffman made enough from the diggings to pay his owner \$1,000 in full for his freedom. He stayed at the site long enough to amass another stake, then moved southwest to the Santa Cruz region. There he purchased a small house on an acre of land and leased a sawmill, going into business with a young white man named Samuel McAdams. They cut redwood timber, which they planned to sell in San Francisco for \$100 per thousand feet (present-day equivalent of \$2,900). Boffman intended to use his profits to purchase the freedom of his wife Matilda and his children, from whom he had not heard in more than a year. Unfortunately, the schooner transporting the timber up the coast sank and his expected profits vanished. The partnership with McAdams dissolved and Boffman was forced to hire out as a laborer and farm worker in the Santa Cruz area. In February 1860, his hard work and frugality paid off. He purchased a 45-acre ranch at Rodeo Gulch in the Santa Cruz area. Then in partnership with Herman Siegmann, a German emigrant, he put in an orchard and a crop of wheat and oats. Boffman had high hopes of reuniting with his family on his ranch. However, a dispute with the

powerful and unscrupulous county sheriff, John T. Porter, over the ownership of livestock, placed his plans on hold.<sup>402</sup>

The sheriff claimed that a mare and colt that had been pasturing on Boffman's property belonged to him and that Boffman had sold them illegally. Porter threatened Boffman with prison if he did not produce \$200 (2009 equivalent of \$5,329) to settle the matter. Knowing that African Americans had no right to testify in court, Boffman acquiesced and agreed to pay. On October 9, 1860, George Otto, a local businessman, German emigrant, and friend of Boffman's business partner, Seigmann, paid Porter \$100 (present-day equivalent of \$2,660) to end the affair. However, Porter initiated a lawsuit on January 3, 1861, against Boffman for the full amount. The former slave was forced to pay \$200 plus interest. He was unable to satisfy the judgment against him and on March 16, 1861, the county auctioned off his land and livestock at a constable's sale for \$800 (present-day equivalent of \$20,100). Boffman received nothing.<sup>403</sup>

Disheartened by the loss of everything he had worked so long and hard for, Boffman once again had to hire himself out as a laborer. In 1864, local merchant and Methodist minister Elihu Anthony befriended Dave and helped him move onto a section of land owned by the school in the Vine Hill district of Santa Cruz County. Over time, Boffman cleared the land, built a small wooden dwelling, and planted an orchard and a 40-acre vineyard. As the years slipped by, he gave up on the dream of being reunited with his wife and children. Elihu Anthony, however, continued to search for them, and he finally located Boffman's granddaughter, Annie Drisdorn, the child of his oldest daughter, Matilda. She had been living in Colusa County in northern California. Anthony sent her money for a train ticket to Santa Cruz and was with Boffman when she arrived at the depot. Annie informed her grandfather that his wife, thinking

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<sup>402</sup> Reader, "Uncle Dave's Story," Part 2.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.



him dead, had remarried and moved to Kansas. She had died there several years earlier. Boffman's only remaining child, George, was living in Topeka. He had been an infant when Boffman set out for California in 1851 and had no memory of his father. Annie stayed on and looked after her grandfather for six months, but then had to return to her home in Colusa County.<sup>404</sup>

Dave Boffman lived in the Vine Hill district for 30 years and became an eccentric figure in the area. He never owned a pair of shoes in his life. When he came into town on supply trips, he often could be seen walking barefoot beside his old plow horse. The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* reported that Boffman was once spotted "carrying on his back a heavy plow from a Santa Cruz blacksmith shop to his farm, a distance of fully eight miles, performing this great task to save the strain on his old horse." On September 23, 1893, Dave Boffman died in his sleep. He was taken back to the city of Santa Cruz to be buried in Elihu Anthony's family plot in the Odd Fellows Cemetery. The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* remembered him as "honest, confiding, simple, industrious, and without a vice."<sup>405</sup>

Jane Elizabeth Manning James was also a black pioneer who was highly regarded by her neighbors. However, racial prejudice doomed her efforts to secure full inclusion in the community she had devoutly embraced for nearly five decades. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 14). In the fall of 1847, Jane Elizabeth Manning James, her husband, Isaac James, and two sons began their trek across the plains from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Salt Lake Valley. She and her family undertook the journey not as slaves but as free people. They were also Mormons. Jane Elizabeth's pilgrimage west and her involvement in the religious community there reveal the unique dilemma confronting many of Utah's black settlers. Historian Ronald G. Coleman has

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Both quotes from the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, in Reader, "Uncle Dave's Story," Part 2.

written that Jane Elizabeth's story "embodies the intersection of religion, race, and gender in the nineteenth century, as well as its implications for the western frontier region."<sup>406</sup> Her story is one of perseverance, dignity, and accomplishment. Yet, race and religious dogma prevented her from fulfilling her highest aspiration. Jane Elizabeth Manning was born in 1813 in Wilton, Connecticut to free parents, Isaac and Phillis Manning. As a young girl, she was put to work as a domestic servant in the household of prominent Wilton farmer Joseph Fritch. She became pregnant in 1837 (the father was reputed to be a white Presbyterian minister or Methodist minister) and gave birth to a son, Sylvester, in 1838; then she returned to work in the Fritch home. At the age of 14 she had joined the Presbyterian church, but recalled many years later, "[I]t seemed to me there was something more that I was looking for."<sup>407</sup> Her spiritual void was filled in 1842 when she attended a service conducted by a Mormon missionary in the area. Convinced that she had heard the "true gospel," she was baptized and confirmed as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>408</sup>

In 1843, the newly converted black Saint (along with several members of her family), joined a band of white Mormons who were departing Wilton, Connecticut, bound for the Mormon enclave in Nauvoo, Illinois. The interracial group traveled together via the canals until the black members ran out of money in Buffalo, New York. The whites in the party did not come to their aid, so the African Americans completed their journey by walking the remaining 800 miles. In Nauvoo, Jane Elizabeth was introduced to Mormon prophet Joseph Smith who asked her to stay on as a servant in his home. Her piety so impressed the family that Smith's wife offered to adopt her as a child into the family. She declined, but years later, expressed regret

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<sup>406</sup> Coleman, "Is There No Blessing for Me?" 144.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*

about her decision: “I did not understand or know what it meant . . . I did not know my own mind. I did not comprehend.”<sup>409</sup>

After the murder of Joseph Smith in 1844, Jane Elizabeth began working for the family of Brigham Young, who had assumed leadership of the Latter-day Saints. In February 1846, she married Isaac James, a free black Mormon who also lived in Nauvoo. As violence between the Mormons and their neighbors in Illinois escalated, Jane Elizabeth and Isaac decided to join the phased exodus of the Latter-day Saints from Nauvoo to the Salt Lake Valley. Jane Elizabeth was pregnant when she and her family started out on the first leg of the trip in the spring of 1846. Jane Elizabeth and Isaac’s son, Silas was born along the trail at Hog Creek (identified in some accounts as Keg Creek), Iowa. For the second half of their journey, from the Missouri River to the Salt Lake Valley, the James family gathered with other Mormon emigrants at a church-directed outfitting post west of Winter Quarters (at today’s Omaha) in June. There, Isaac, Jane Elizabeth, the two children Silas and Sylvester (to whom Jane Elizabeth gave birth when she was 14), and Jane Elizabeth’s brother (also named Isaac) joined a 76-wagon Mormon pioneer company led by Daniel Spencer and Ira Eldredge. The group departed on June 17, 1847.<sup>410</sup>

They reached their destination on September 19, 1847, two months after Green Flake’s party. They were not the first blacks to arrive in Utah, but they were the first free African Americans to enter the valley. Historian Ronald G. Coleman has noted that Jane Elizabeth’s autobiography (written in 1893) tended to “minimize the hardships” of the overland trek—the

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 147; Coleman, “A History of Blacks in Utah, 1825-1910,” 56.

<sup>410</sup> Coleman, Ibid., 7; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Church History, “Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel, 1847-1868,” <http://lds.org/churchhistory/library/pioneercompany/1,15797.4017-1-285.000.html> [accessed August 28, 2011]. Jane Elizabeth Manning James noted in her memoirs, “At Hog Creek, my son Silas was born.” “Life History of Jane Elizabeth Manning James,” as transcribed by Elizabeth J. D. Round[y], Blackslds.org, A Web Site Dedicated to Black Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <http://www.blacklds.org/manning> [accessed January 19, 2012]. Coleman, “A History of Blacks in Utah,” wrote, “Jane was pregnant with her son Silas, who was born at Hogg Creek, Iowa,” 56-57. Also see Coleman, “Is There No Blessing for Me?” in which he wrote, “In June 1846 Jane Elizabeth gave birth to a second son, Silas, at the family’s temporary homesite, Keg Creek, Iowa,” 147.

ones that other “Mormon emigrants vividly recall—such as inadequate forage for livestock, finding suitable fords for river crossing, and the sudden blinding dust storms common to the plains.” Coleman has speculated that she downplayed these things out of a growing concern about her “place in the afterlife” and how fellow Mormons would view her.<sup>411</sup>

Once in their new home, Jane Elizabeth and Isaac immersed themselves in the duties of caring for their family. In the spring of 1848, Isaac and Jane Elizabeth welcomed a daughter, MaryAnn, into the family. She was the first black child born in Utah. By 1860, Jane Elizabeth had given birth to five more children.

In addition to family responsibilities, Jane Elizabeth and Isaac also were “intimately involved in the network of mutuality and reciprocity that characterized the Mormon settlement during the early years in Utah.” In difficult times, Jane Elizabeth received assistance from and offered it to her neighbors.<sup>412</sup> In her autobiography, she reflected on the times when her children (she had 10) had to endure cold and hunger. No matter how little she had, however, her neighbors could depend on her to share with them in times of need. In 1849, Eliza Lyman recounted an incident when she did not have enough flour to make bread for her family and had “no prospect of getting more till after harvest.” Lyman noted in her journal, “Jane James, the colored woman let me have two pounds of flour, it being half of what she had.”<sup>413</sup>

By 1865, the family’s circumstances had improved. They owned land, a home, household items, and some livestock. Isaac’s occupation was listed in the Utah federal census as farmer, but from 1849 to 1851 he also worked as a coachman for Brigham Young. In 1861, Sylvester, the oldest son, was a member of the Nauvoo Legion (the Utah Territorial Militia), and owned a

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<sup>411</sup> Coleman, *Ibid*; Coleman, “Is There No Blessing for Me?,” 147-148, 152.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>413</sup> Eliza Lyman’s journal, quoted in Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer*, 9-10.

musket and 10 pounds of ammunition.<sup>414</sup> However, Jane Elizabeth's divorce from Isaac in 1870, another short-lived marriage four years later, and considerable financial demands from her children left her in poverty. Despite these setbacks, she clung to her religion and continued to ask for the rituals of her faith that would make her eligible to attain the "highest level of the celestial kingdom in the afterlife." The temple ordinances Jane Elizabeth yearned for, and which were denied her on account of her race, included the rites of "endowment" that promise faithful Mormons "access to God's presence in the next life," and the ritual "sealing" that binds family members together for eternity. Without these rites, Jane Elizabeth believed, she would be relegated to a lower tier of heaven, away from God, and would have no certainty of sharing the afterlife with her children.<sup>415</sup>

For more than a decade, she requested her endowments with the poignant query, "Is there no blessing for me?" Church officials extolled her piety, exemplary character, and service to the community, but continued to deny her appeals. Jane Elizabeth Manning James died in Salt Lake City in 1908 at the age of 95, without ever having fulfilled her most important aspiration. However, seven decades later, when the ban on black men in the Mormon priesthood was lifted, an interracial group of Saints performed the rites that finally bestowed on her the endowments she had sought most of her life.<sup>416</sup>

### **Transformed Expectations**

Overland emigration transformed the lives of African Americans, free and enslaved. For some, the trek westward placed the travelers on new paths literally and figuratively, redirecting their finishing point and altering the course their lives would take. Charles and Nancy Alexander

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<sup>414</sup> Coleman, "Blacks in Utah, 1825-1910," 57. See also Coleman, "Is There No Blessing for Me?," 148-150.

<sup>415</sup> Coleman, "Is There No Blessing for Me?," 151-155; The LDS Endowment, "About the Endowment," <http://www.ldsendowment.org/about.html> [accessed August 29, 2011].

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-149, 150-157. See also Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer*, 9-13.

went west with high hopes for a new life. However, the end of the California Trail did not signal an end to their journey. The Alexanders' decision to push beyond the borders of the United States was life-changing for them and for future generations.

Charles and Nancy Alexander were described as “of mixed blood.” Nancy’s mother was black and her father was an “Irishman.” Charles’s mother was black and his father was described as “Indian.”<sup>417</sup> Harold Alexander, the great-great-great-great grandson of Charles and Nancy, and his wife, Gay Alexander, stated in a 2009 interview that Charles and Nancy “were never slaves.”<sup>418</sup> (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 15).

The couple married in Springfield, Illinois, on Christmas day in the early 1840s and later settled in St. Louis, Missouri, where for 16 years Charles operated a grist mill. Harold and Gay Alexander explained that Charles and Nancy were also “farmers for the most part,” and Charles worked as a carpenter and was a minister as well. British Columbia scholar James William Pilton has written that in 1857, “when the gold mines of California proved too powerful an attraction,” Charles, Nancy, and their two children started for California. In a 2010 interview, Charles Alexander’s great-great grandson Doug Hudlin related that the family set out in a “van pulled by a four-yoke bullock team.” They followed the established California Trail (possibly from Plattsmouth, where the Platte meets the Missouri River) through Nebraska to South Pass and on to Fort Bridger, and then took the Hastings Cutoff to Salt Lake City. From there they may have taken the Salt Lake Cutoff north to join the California Trail at City of Rocks. They followed the

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<sup>417</sup> San Francisco African American Historical & Cultural Society, “Charles and Nancy Alexander,” *Monographs: Blacks in the West* (San Francisco: African American Historical & Cultural Society, No. 1 Manuscript Series, 1976), 87-88. This article is an excerpt from James William Pilton, “Negro Settlement in British Columbia, 1858-1871,” master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, 1951. The article also contains a reprint of a 1909 newspaper interview (newspaper unidentified) with Charles and Nancy Alexander. This original document is in the personal collection of Barton Alexander, Victoria, British Columbia. Hereafter cited as Charles and Nancy Alexander Interview, 1909.

<sup>418</sup> Harold and Gay Alexander and Family, Interview with Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, August 1, 2009. (Hereafter cited as Alexander Family Interview.)

Humboldt to its sink south of Lovelock and then split off onto the Carson River Route through the Fortymile Desert. At Fort Churchill, according to their descendant's description, the Alexanders continued on the Carson Route through the Sierra south of Lake Tahoe to Sacramento, and from there made their way to San Francisco.<sup>419</sup>

The Alexanders and their party encountered Indians who were “occasionally a menace, stealing the cattle and other possessions carried by the party.”<sup>420</sup> This was very common along the Humboldt River. Virtually everyone on this route complained about the Shoshone and Paiutes. Harold Alexander recalled that his grandmother used to tell him stories about his ancestors “fighting Indians” on the trail.<sup>421</sup> Doug Hudlin said that his great-great grandfather was certain they “would make the trip safely as he had faith in his Bible, his compass, and his log book.”<sup>422</sup>

Once the Alexanders reached their destination, Pilton writes, Charles “was not long satisfied in California, arriving as he did when there was so much discontent among the coloured people when rumours of new discoveries were beginning to come down from the north.”<sup>423</sup> Harold Alexander explains their departure more bluntly: “They left San Francisco because of discrimination.”<sup>424</sup> Therefore, in 1858, the Alexanders moved to Victoria, British Columbia. Gay Alexander commented that “when they left California those people . . . must have had some sense of individuality [independence], knowing they had to work the land.”<sup>425</sup> Charles left Nancy

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<sup>419</sup> Alexander Family Interview; Pilton, “Negro Settlement in British Columbia,” 87; Doug Hudlin Video Interview, conducted by Dale Hitchcocks, British Columbia Black History Awareness Society, April 23, 2010 (hereafter cited as Hudlin Interview), [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yp5IM9Qs\\_0g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yp5IM9Qs_0g) [accessed February 28, 2011]. See also “Charles and Nancy Alexander,” in “A Resource Guide on Black Pioneers in British Columbia” (Victoria, B.C.: The British Columbia Black History Awareness Society, n. d.), 64-65.

<sup>420</sup> Pilton, “Negro Settlement in British Columbia,” 87-88.

<sup>421</sup> Alexander Family Interview.

<sup>422</sup> Hudlin Interview.

<sup>423</sup> Pilton, “Negro Settlement in British Columbia,” 88.

<sup>424</sup> Alexander Family Interview.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

and the children in Victoria and departed for the gold fields along the Fraser River. After modest success as a miner, he returned to his family in Victoria, where he “worked at his trade as a carpenter at \$6.00 per day.” In the fall of 1858, the Alexanders relocated to Saanich, north of Victoria, and there Charles and Nancy spent 33 years as prosperous farmers. In 1894, the couple moved for the last time, into a home they christened “Rockabella Gardens” in the Swan Lake district (later changed to the Lake Hill district). Nancy Alexander died on March 23, 1912, at the age of 78. Charles Alexander was 89 years old when he died on January 13, 1913. Both were buried in the Shady Creek Cemetery, in Saanich, Vancouver Island, British Columbia. In 1992, great-great-grandson Doug Hudlin charted the Alexander family tree and counted 400 descendants of the couple who began their journey across sweet freedom’s plains in 1857.<sup>426</sup>

Harold Alexander recalled that as a child, he had resented the “work, work, work” ethic that had been instilled in the Alexander family for generations, but later in life he “came to realize that [for] those people, that’s how they survived.” Gay Alexander explained that the Alexander family was “hardworking . . . there was no idleness . . . He built the church [Shady Creek Church], he built his home . . . They had to [multi-task] because that is what pioneers had to do.”<sup>427</sup>

Sylvia Estes Stark and her family were imbued with the same work ethic that motivated Charles and Nancy Alexander. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 16). Howard Estes, Sylvia’s father, used his position as an expert livestock handler as a stepping-stone to freedom. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 17). He persuaded his owner to allow him to drive a herd of cattle from Missouri to the booming California gold fields rather than let the owner’s inexperienced sons herd them and risk considerable loss. With this opportunity, Estes started planning for his

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<sup>426</sup> Charles and Nancy Alexander Interview, 1909; Hudlin Interview; Alexander Family Interview.

<sup>427</sup> Alexander Family Interview; Hudlin Interview.



freedom and that of his family. Once in California, he convinced his owner to let him remain and work as a miner, promising to send back \$1,000 to buy his freedom papers.

Estes kept his word, but when his owner reneged on the deal, he was forced to remain in California and make more money to free his family from bondage. Sylvia recalled in an interview that “the time seemed long while waiting for [his] return.” During his absence, Sylvia’s older sister, Agnes, died from a mysterious fever and her death plunged her mother into deep mourning. She remembered seeing her mother steal away “alone to the seclusion of an old shed” where Sylvia watched her “on her knees praying for the safe return of Howard, and that her children would be blessed and free.”<sup>428</sup> (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 18).

Howard Estes eventually accumulated enough money to rescue them. He returned to Missouri via Panama, where he caught malaria. He had booked passage on a boat named the *Grace Darling* that ran between San Francisco and the port of Colombo, but missed its departure. Sylvia stated that this turned out to be fortunate for her father because the “boat was rammed amidship” and all on board were lost except the cook. A year after Agnes’s death, Howard returned. Sylvia remembered seeing him “coming through the pasture, wearing a new grey suit, a new white panama and tie of many colors.” She also recalled that he “carried a carpet bag and had a soldier’s coat thrown over his arm.” In the same interview, Sylvia said that when her father came back from California to Missouri to claim his family, he “returned a free man, happy that he had been spared to return home, though he felt very sad for the loss of . . . Agnes.” Howard Estes paid his owner \$1,000 (present-day \$29,000) each for his wife Hannah and their son Jackson; Sylvia’s freedom cost \$900 (present-day \$26,100).<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> Sylvia Stark Interview, Part 1.

<sup>429</sup> Sylvia Stark Interview, Part 1.

Once they were free and together, Sylvia's family made plans to leave Missouri and go to California. Her mother's former owner, Charles Leopold, decided to take a herd of 600 cattle to market in California and hired Sylvia's father and her brother as herders; he hired Sylvia's mother to cook for the party. Sylvia recalled in an interview that their group "was a large caravan."<sup>430</sup> Thus, Sylvia's family left Missouri with the Leopold party on April 1, 1851, in a refurbished covered wagon given to them by Leopold. Sylvia related that the family "made a jolly start by making April fool jokes, etc." As they rolled through Missouri, her mother "gathered wild greens . . . and they had one last good feed of good old Missouri wild greens."<sup>431</sup>

On the trail Hannah Estes cooked with "sundried Buffalo chips" that "made their pancakes and bacon taste smoky, but they ate them with relish." Like other emigrant children, Sylvia and her brother amused themselves by "playing tag" with the other children, running between the wagons and hiding in the dust, and admiring the abundant herds of buffalo and the wildflowers that flourished on the prairie.<sup>432</sup> Sylvia's wagon train was plagued by mosquitoes and swarms of locusts that "darkened the sky and fell about the wagons, creeping inside the canvas, getting into the cooking utensils, and other paraphernalia." These were routine annoyances; however, Sylvia recalled that when the party was camped and grazing the cattle at "Humbolt Creek" [Humboldt River], they met two white women "who as children had witnessed the slaying of their parents, a sister and a brother." The women told the group that they had been taken captive by the Indians but "in time they were rescued." Sylvia related that both women were married and "still living in the same isolated district where stalked the ghost in memory of that dark tragedy." She admitted that their story caused her mother and herself "apprehension for

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<sup>430</sup> Sylvia Stark Interview, Part 2.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

the future on the long trail that lay ahead.” However, despite “the dangers attending the journey,” she and her brother were thrilled by life on the great plains.<sup>433</sup>

Sylvia’s party arrived in Salt Lake City “sometime during the harvest” and was treated with “the greatest hospitality by the Latter Day Saints.” She stated that Brigham Young visited them and invited them to stay for the winter and pasture their cattle in “a place called Mountain Meadows.” Sylvia noted that her father declined the invitation, “having passed through that country before and hearing strange tales about Indians robbing and killing the immigrants in that locality, [but] suspected that the real source of the crimes had never been divulged.” Howard Estes decided to leave the Salt Lake City area with his family even if the rest of the caravan wanted to stay. He “preferred to continue the journey alone in his own wagon rather than take the risk.”<sup>434</sup> Unfortunately, the record does not indicate whether any of the company accepted the invitation to stay over and winter while Sylvia and family continued on their way to Sacramento.

It is tempting to assume that Sylvia Estes Stark, an elderly woman at the time of the interviews, was alluding to the Mountain Meadows massacre, in which most of an Arkansas wagon train (except children under six) were murdered by Mormon leaders in the vicinity of Cedar City, Utah. That shocking event, however, took place in 1857, six years after Stark’s party had passed through Salt Lake City. Ascribing “future history” to past events is one of the most challenging problems researchers face when using oral history accounts. However, Stark’s recollections of the group’s time in Salt Lake City serve two purposes. First, her reminiscences stand as further documentation of black overlanders’ reaction to stories about Indian violence against emigrants. Second, her memory of this incident, though mistaken in some key

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid. This account of Salt Lake City, Brigham Young, and Mountain Meadows may be a confused recollection on the part of Sylvia Estes Stark, who at the time her daughter, Marie Albertina Stark Wallace, interviewed her was in her late 80s or early 90s.

particulars, nonetheless reveals that western emigrants, black and white, still viewed Mormon society with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

When Sylvia and her family arrived in California as free people after six months on the trail, they set up their household in Placerville. In an interview conducted in the 1920s (by her daughter, Marie Albertina Stark), Sylvia recounted that her mother, Hannah, warned the children, “We’ll have to work hard . . . but we are working for ourselves now.”<sup>435</sup> Sylvia’s father, Howard, bought land in California and also worked in the mines. Hannah worked as a laundress in her home and Sylvia helped. In 1855, Sylvia married Louis Stark, a free black man from Kentucky. Years later, she observed that her husband and parents, like many other blacks in California, were “becoming alarmed over general agitation under southern pressure to make California a slave state.” Therefore, the Estes family prepared to leave their “comfortable home” in California and “go in search of greater freedom.” They had heard about “New Caledonia as B.C. was then called,” and “longed for the freedom of B.C.’s fir covered hills.” Howard Estes and Louis Stark sold their farms and in 1858 the two families left San Francisco on the *Brother Johnathan* for British Columbia. They lived first in Vancouver, but eventually Sylvia and Louis Stark and their children settled on Salt Spring Island.<sup>436</sup> She and Louis homesteaded on the island for many years. After her husband died, Sylvia continued to live there and run the family farm with her son, Willis, until her death in 1944 at the age of 106.

The journey on the Oregon Trail was also transformative for Louis (also spelled Lewis) Southworth, who came west as a slave and utilized his considerable musical abilities to purchase his freedom. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 19). Southworth (original surname Hunter) was born a slave in Tennessee on July 4, 1830. His parents, Louis and Pauline Hunter, were also

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<sup>435</sup> Stark Interview, Part 2.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

slaves. From the age of two, he lived on the plantation of James Southworth in Franklin County, Missouri. His father died of smallpox there. In 1853, when Lou was 23 years old, his owner emigrated to Oregon and took Lou and his mother with him. Lou and Pauline traveled in a company that included at least two other slaves: Amanda Johnson, whose owner was Nancy Wilhite, and Benjamin Johnson (no indication of his relationship to Amanda).<sup>437</sup> On the overland trip, Lou, an accomplished musician, entertained the company by playing the violin. In 1854, Lou's owner allowed him to settle on an abandoned Oregon Donation Land claim near Monroe, in Lane County, Oregon, even though donation land was open only to whites. His owner, feeling the pinch of hard times, moved in with him for a while. Around 1855, Lou left his Donation Land residence for a stint in Southern Oregon's gold fields near Jacksonville. He earned \$300 (2009 equivalent of \$7,680). While making his way back from Jacksonville sometime in March or April of 1856, he was stopped by soldiers from Colonel John Kelsey's Second Regiment who were fighting in the Rogue Valley Indian Wars. They demanded his rifle. Rather than relinquish his firearm, Lou chose to go with them because, he recalled years later, "Feeling as if I could not part with my gun, which was the only means of defense I had, I joined the company." He was wounded in a skirmish with Indians while with Kelsey's regiment.<sup>438</sup>

Southworth eventually made his way back to his owner with the \$300 he had earned in the gold fields; he used it as down payment on his freedom. The money came from his labor as a miner, but a substantial portion came from playing the fiddle in the southern Oregon gold camps. In the fall of 1858, Lou traveled south to Yreka, California, where he engaged in mining but he

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<sup>437</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 75-76. For brief narratives of Lou Southworth and Amanda Johnson, see George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, supp. series 1, Arkansas, Colorado, Minnesota, Missouri, Oregon and Washington Narratives, vol. 2 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1977), 273-278. See also, "Lou Southworth," *Oregon Encyclopedia*, Oregon History and Culture, [http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/entry/view/southworth\\_louis\\_1829\\_1917](http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/entry/view/southworth_louis_1829_1917) [accessed August 28, 2010].

<sup>438</sup> Lou Southworth quoted in Peggy Baldwin, "A Legacy Beyond the Generations" (Genealogical Forum of Oregon Annual Writing Contest, 2006), <http://www.gfo.org/writecontest/2006-1st.pdf>. Also see John B. Horner, "Uncle Lou and His Violin," *Days and Deeds in the Oregon Country* (Portland: J. K. Gill, 1928), 139-146.

quickly discovered he could earn more money “playing the violin for dancing schools.” He taught violin and played for dance schools in Yreka and in Virginia City, Nevada. He amassed another \$400 toward his freedom in that manner. In a 1915 interview, a Benton County, Oregon, resident who had seen Southworth perform at local dances recalled: “Oh, boy, could he play the fiddle! He would sing . . . and he would get out there and dance with it.”<sup>439</sup> In an interview with the Corvallis *Daily Gazette* in 1915, Southworth explained that he played his fiddle in the gold camps for “the boys who were far away from home for the first time.” He wanted them to remember his fiddling and to “talk over the days when there was not society for men like us out West; when . . . men didn’t go by their right names and didn’t care what they did.” He hoped his gold-camp audiences, thinking back to the times they had heard him play, would ask themselves, “Where’d we all been and what’d we all done in the mines, but for Uncle Lou’s fiddle which was the most like church of anything we had?” Southworth described himself as an “old man who’s done some mighty hard work in eighty-five years.” But, he admitted, “I forget the work I’ve done and the years I’ve lived when my bow comes down soft and gentle-like and the fiddle seems to sing the songs of slavery days till the air grows mellow with music and the old-time feelin’ comes back, and I can hear familiar voices that are no more.”<sup>440</sup>

In 1859, Southworth finally completed the last payment for his freedom, for a total of \$1,000 (the 2009 equivalent of \$26,600). Although he was freed, he never received formal emancipation papers from his owner who, even after receiving the final payment, signed a petition asking the Oregon territorial government to protect slave property. In 1868, Southworth moved to Buena Vista, Polk County, Oregon, where he learned to read and write, purchased land, opened a blacksmith and livery stable, and joined the Victoria Lodge of Masons. He

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<sup>439</sup> Baldwin, “A Legacy Beyond the Generations.”

<sup>440</sup> Vivian T. Williams, *Northwest Pioneer Fiddlers*, “Louis Alexander Southworth, 1830-1917” (Seattle: Voyager Recordings & Publications, 2010), <http://www.voyagerrecords.com/arNWfiddlers.htm> [accessed July 14, 2011].

married Mary [Maria] Cooper and helped raise her adopted son. He later moved to Tidewater, Oregon, near Waldport, where he farmed and operated a ferry business on the Alsea River. He also donated land for a schoolhouse and served as chair of the school board. When Mary died in 1901, he bought a home in Corvallis, where he hung his fiddle and a portrait of Abraham Lincoln over the mantle. (see Appendix, Chapter 4, Photo 20). In a 1915 interview with the Corvallis *Daily Gazette*, he related that when leaders in his Baptist church congregation disapproved of his fiddling and threatened to expel him if he refused to stop, he responded: "I told them to keep me in the church with my fiddle if they could, but to turn me out if they must; for I could not think of parting with the fiddle. I reckon my name isn't written in their books here any more; but I somehow hope it's written in the big book up yonder, where they aren't so particular about fiddles."<sup>441</sup> Louis Southworth died on June 28, 1917, at the age of 86. He was buried next to Mary in an unmarked grave in Crystal Lake Cemetery in Corvallis.<sup>442</sup>

Black emigrants' stories reveal a similarity of aspirations but at the same time show the unique and individual methods they used to accomplish their goals. For most African American pioneers, the West was more than a fixed point on a compass; it was both a place and an ideal. Their journey was open-ended; charts and guidebooks alone did not dictate the end of the road. For them, freedom from enslavement and racial proscription were the most important markers of the trail's end. Some found fulfillment; others were sadly disillusioned. But all resolutely pursued their goals and were prepared to push beyond socially constructed boundaries or those drawn on maps. Black overlander George W. Bush, who set out for the Oregon Country in 1844, gave voice to this determination when he declared his willingness to leave the country altogether

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<sup>441</sup> Lou Southworth, quoted in Baldwin, "A Legacy Beyond the Generations." Also see Horner, "Uncle Lou and His Violin," 130-146; Williams, *Northwest Pioneer Fiddlers*.

<sup>442</sup> Baldwin, "A Legacy Beyond the Generations"; McLagan, *Peculiar Paradise*, 83-84; Oregon Northwest Black Pioneers: Celebrating the Contributions of Oregon's African-American Pioneers, "Louis A. Southworth (1830-1917)," <http://www.oregonnorthwestblackpioneers.org/historybriefs.htm> [accessed August 8, 2010].

and press on to the Mexican lands of California or New Mexico if he could not get the “rights of a free man” in the United States.<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Bush’s remarks were recorded by Minto, “Reminiscences of Experiences of the Oregon Trail,” part 2, 212.



## CHAPTER 5

### PLACE OF PROMISE

Upon arriving at their destinations, wherever their journey ultimately ended, African American pioneers had to focus on the difficult task of making a place for themselves in the free air of the West. Many of the western settlements that they formed and entered into when their journey came to an end, like the nomadic wagon communities that had traversed the overland trails, also were organized out of a need for mutual assistance. The stories in this chapter highlight the experiences of several black overland emigrants who arrived at their destinations and turned to the difficult work of establishing themselves as free people, carving out a place in the emerging economies of the West, building their communities, and challenging the barriers that prevented them from achieving their goals.

Their stories, like those in previous chapters, reveal the special and complex meaning of the West for African Americans. They reinforce the fact that the West as a place and as a concept has held multiple and nuanced meanings for blacks as well as whites. A literary scholar of the West, Blake Allmendinger, argues that the West has represented “different things to various people living in numerous places over hundreds of years.” It beckoned African American travelers as a place of promise. For many black overland emigrants, freedom in the most literal sense of the word was the heart of the promise of the West.<sup>444</sup>

#### **Establishing Themselves as Free People**

Daniel Rodgers, George Washington, William and Mary Sugg, Clara Brown, Barney Ford, Ben Palmer, and David and Rachel Brown were black people whose stories underscore the similarity and individuality of the black overland experience. Daniel Rodgers and William Sugg went west as slaves; the others went as free people. Each person arrived under different

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<sup>444</sup> Allmendinger, *Imagining the African American West*, xvii.

conditions, ended their journeys in different communities, and all had to fight to establish themselves. They accomplished this task through legal action, flight, or in some way unique to their circumstances. Their successes confirmed the expectations of the other black emigrants who followed them across sweet freedom's plains.

Historian Sue Bailey Thurman has written that Daniel Rodgers' story epitomizes the spirit of African American overlanders.<sup>445</sup> He was a slave who was determined to live as a free man in the West. His persistence, skill, and ability helped him overcome slavery, deception, and theft. Blacks and whites assisted him in his quest. (see Appendix, Chapter 5, Photo 1).

Daniel Rodgers spent most of his early years on North Carolina and Tennessee plantations as the slave of Redmond Rodgers, a planter who in 1839 moved to a cotton farm in Johnson Valley, Arkansas, taking his slaves with him. By that time, Daniel had married Artimisa Penwright, a "free mulatto woman." When Daniel and Artimisa came to live in Arkansas, they had 10 children: John, Martin, Sam, James, Carrol, Redmond, Jessie, Julia-Ann, Martha and Sallie.<sup>446</sup> They remained together on the Arkansas cotton plantation for nearly a decade until Redmond Rodgers caught gold fever and set out for California, taking his slave Daniel along with him in 1849.

The two men trekked overland from Little Rock, Arkansas. Redmond wanted to strike it rich in the gold fields, and Daniel was eager to arrive in California because Redmond Rodgers had promised to give him liberation papers in exchange for his labor and \$1,100 (present-day equivalent of \$31,200). The overlanders' first stop after briefly touring other parts of California was the Pajaro Valley in present-day Santa Cruz County, where they worked on the Mexican

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<sup>445</sup> Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*, 21.

<sup>446</sup> Sylvia Alden Roberts, *Mining for Freedom: Black History Meets the California Gold Rush* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2008), 56; Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 117. Roberts spells Daniel's wife's name as Artemisa. Beasley's work shows her name spelled Artimisa and this is the way it appears in the primary source documents that are reproduced in Beasley's book. Therefore, I will use the spelling shown in Beasley.

land-grant ranch owned by Don José Amesti (*Rancho Los Corralitos*). Later, Daniel and Redmond moved again to nearby Soquel Valley, where they constructed a small cabin and worked in the surrounding mountains logging redwood timber to sell to the government.<sup>447</sup>

In 1850, Daniel and Redmond left Santa Cruz County and relocated to Sonora, where they worked a claim nearby. For two years, Daniel toiled in the gold fields for his owner by day and used his “spare time” after sundown to do other odd jobs, which included washing and ironing for the other prospectors to earn the price of his freedom.<sup>448</sup>

In 1852, Daniel paid his owner the money in full and Redmond Rodgers handed him documents he alleged to be freedom papers. Daniel, being unable to read or write, had no way to verify them and trusted the slaveholder’s word. In 1854, Daniel and Redmond returned to Arkansas where Daniel began preparations to depart for California with his wife and children. He set about building an ox wagon, purchasing a team of oxen, and outfitting himself with supplies and provisions for the long overland journey. Because of his enthusiasm for California, he even persuaded John Derrick and Robert Johnson, two former slaves from neighboring plantations who had also bought their freedom, to make the move west. Derrick and Johnson set out for the golden state in 1858, settling in Pajaro Valley. They sent back word to Daniel that they were delighted with their new home.<sup>449</sup>

Shortly after receiving the message from Derrick and Johnson, Daniel, Artimisa and their children packed up and headed out to California. As they prepared to cross the county line, white patrollers stopped them and demanded their papers. Artimisa’s documents stated that “Artimisa

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<sup>447</sup> Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers*, 117; Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*. Thurman states that Redmond Rodgers demanded a fee of \$1,000 for his slave’s freedom, 17; Phil Reader, “To Know My Name: A Chronological History of African Americans in Santa Cruz County, Part 2, Chronology, 1542-1860,” Santa Cruz Public Library, 1995, <http://www.santacruzpl.org/history/articles/127/> [accessed August 3, 2010]; Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*. Roberts states that Redmond Rodgers demanded a fee of \$1,200 for his slave’s freedom, 56.

<sup>448</sup> Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*, 17-18; Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers*, 71, 117; Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 56.

<sup>449</sup> Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 57.

Penwright was the daughter of her mistress by a negro man, and neither she nor any of her children were to ever be slaves.”<sup>450</sup> However, Daniel was shocked to learn that Redmond Rodgers had taken his hard-earned money and had given him not manumission papers, but a note that authorized any white reader to “sell the slave, Dan Rodgers” at auction to the highest bidder and transmit the proceeds of his sale to Redmond Rodgers.<sup>451</sup>

Finding himself in bondage once again and on the auction block, Daniel attempted to repurchase his liberty. This time he received help from an unexpected source. Fifteen prominent slave owners from nearby Dardanelle, Yell County, outraged by the unscrupulous treatment he had received at the hands of his owner, came together to buy him at auction and give him legal manumission documents. In addition, to ensure his unhampered passage to California, the group furnished him with a certificate attesting to his personal character and his free status. In it the slaveholders declared that they, “having been personally acquainted with the bearer, Daniel Rodgers, a free man of color for many years past and up to the present time, take pleasure in certifying to his character for honesty, industry and integrity; also as a temperate and peaceful man; and one worthy of trust and confidence of all philanthropic and good men wherever he may go.”<sup>452</sup>

In the spring of 1860, Daniel and Artimisa Rodgers and family rolled into the Pajaro Valley to the town of Watsonville in Santa Cruz County after a year-long journey across the plains in an ox-drawn wagon. They had traveled alone and encountered friendly Indians who traded with them. In exchange for some of their supplies, the Indians had provided them with

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<sup>450</sup> Artemisa Penwright Daniels manumission papers, reprinted in Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers*, 87.

<sup>451</sup> The note is quoted in Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 57.

<sup>452</sup> The certificate is dated, Dardanell, Yell County, Arkansas, April 30, 1859, and it is signed by Robert E. Walters, George Williams, Joseph Miles, W. H. Spirey, L. D. Parish, George L. Kimble, Samuel Dickens, Haunis A. Hawill, A. Ferril, James A. Baird, William A. Ross, C. M. Mundock, A.H. Fulton, Joseph P. Williams, and B. I. Jacoway. Reprinted in Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers*, 87.

lodging and accurate directions about the best routes to take along the way. Historian Sue Bailey Thurman concluded that the Native Americans they met seemed “particularly concerned for the welfare of a colored man, making his way alone with wife and small children across the plains.”<sup>453</sup>

When the Rodgers family pulled into Watsonville, their old friends, John Derrick and Robert Johnson, were there to greet them. Their welcoming party also included a crowd of white well-wishers, since Watsonville was an abolitionist stronghold. After a decade, Daniel Rodgers had finally returned to California, bringing his family with him. He also brought news that other African Americans from Arkansas would be following him there.<sup>454</sup>

The Rodgers family settled on 80 acres of land near Watsonville and developed their homestead into a prosperous farm. Not content to let economic success be his only goal, Daniel Rodgers involved himself in community affairs, quickly rising to leadership of the thriving, small black community. He and his family were in the forefront of the fight for black enfranchisement. He worked tirelessly for that cause, circulating petitions, raising funds, and organizing meetings and rallies to challenge California’s discriminatory laws.

However, education became his main focus. John Derrick and Robert Johnson married two of Rodgers’ daughters and had a number of children. He and his sons-in-law engaged in a long battle with the school board to allow black children to attend the local school, which barred them in 1860. Yielding a bit to the pressure, the board established a separate school for black children and hired a white teacher for them. This was the beginning of the first “public schools” for the education of black children in the state. The Rodgers and Derrick children attended the school and were taught by a Miss Knowlton, described by Delilah Beasley as a “young white girl

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<sup>453</sup> Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 58; Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin*, 20.

<sup>454</sup> Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 58; Reader, “To Know My Name, Part 2.”

of northern parentage” who was an ardent abolitionist and a strong influence on the African American students. In 1878, African American children finally were admitted into local schools with white students. Rodgers dedicated himself to the task of getting the best education for his grandchildren. He helped three of his grandsons graduate from the University of California and saw most of his offspring go on to have productive and fulfilling careers in public service, journalism, and the military. On January 21, 1903 while visiting one of his daughters in Oakland, he was involved in a trolley car accident and was severely injured. Shortly after, he succumbed to his injuries.<sup>455</sup>

When asked to recall his years of enslavement and his fight to establish himself as a free man in the West, Daniel Rodgers admitted wistfully in an interview shortly before his death, “Sometimes it seems that I can look back upon forever.”<sup>456</sup> However, his story reveals a man more accustomed to self-reliance than nostalgia. He added that he would not have anyone “coddling and making a lot of fuss over [me].” Until the day he died at the age of 103, he had no need for glasses and refused to use a cane.<sup>457</sup> Daniel Rodgers died scarcely realizing the heroic significance of his crossing the continent three times in search of a better life. Sue Bailey Thurman wrote that his determination was representative not only of the “great trek of his people to the West but also an earnest indication of the high hopes and creative adventures, which characterized their spirit.”<sup>458</sup>

George Washington arrived in the Oregon Territory in 1850. Like Daniel Rodgers, his efforts to make a place for himself were both thwarted and aided by whites. Washington was

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<sup>455</sup> Reader, “To Know My Name, Part 2”; Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*, 20-21; Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers*, 118; Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 59-60.

<sup>456</sup> Leon Rowland, “Uncle Dan Rodgers,” Santa Cruz Historical Society Archives, undated paper, reprinted in Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 60.

<sup>457</sup> Daniel Rodgers quoted in Thurman, *Pioneers of Negro Origin*, 21.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*

born in Frederick County, Virginia, on August 15, 1817. (see Appendix, Chapter 5, Photo 2). His father, whose name is unknown, was a slave and his mother was “of English descent.”<sup>459</sup> His father was sold soon after Washington was born, and his mother gave him to James and Anna Cochrane (sometimes spelled Cochran), a white couple who adopted him and raised him as their child. The Cochranes moved to Ohio and then to Missouri, where as an adult, Washington attempted to go into business for himself. Frustrated by black laws, George Washington decided to go west. On March 15, 1850, he pulled out of Missouri in a wagon train heading for the Oregon Country. James and Anna Cochrane accompanied him.

In a few months, Washington and the Cochranes arrived in Oregon City, where he went to work as a timber cutter. In a few years, he pushed across the Columbia River into what would become Washington Territory. In 1852, he staked a claim, built a cabin, and fenced off and cleared a 12-acre farm on land situated at the confluence of the Skookumchuck and Chehalis rivers. Washington was only the fourth settler in the area.<sup>460</sup> However, Oregon’s black laws prevented African American settlement anywhere in the territory. To get around this barrier, he enlisted the help of James and Anna, who filed a claim for 640 acres under the Donation Land Claim Act. Their claim included the 12 acres that Washington had already staked out. When the Cochranes’ claim was validated by four years of residence, and Washington Territory (which did not ban black land ownership) was established, they deeded the property to George Washington.

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<sup>459</sup> Kit Oldham, “George and Mary Jane Washington Found the Town of Centerville (now Centralia) on January 8, 1875,” HistoryLink.org Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History, [http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file\\_id=5276](http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=5276) [accessed July 18, 2011]. Also see Kit Oldham, “Washington, George (1817-1905),” The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q-aaw/washington-george-1817-1905>; and Clackamas Heritage Partners, Historic Oregon City Presents: End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, “Black Pioneers and Settlers - George Washington,” [http://www.historicoregoncity.org/HOC/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&i](http://www.historicoregoncity.org/HOC/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&i) [accessed December 29, 2008].

<sup>460</sup> Oldham, “George and Mary Jane Washington”; Oregon Historical Society, “George Washington.”

Several years after the death of his adoptive parents, Washington married Mary Jane Cooness (perhaps Cornie), a widow who was of African American and Jewish descent. He continued to operate his thriving farm. In the 1870s, the Washingtons took advantage of the Northern Pacific Railroad's advance from the Columbia River to the Puget Sound. The line was slated to cross their land so they immediately plotted out the town of Centerville (later changed to Centralia) on the site. Centralia, Washington would become a key point on the railroad between the Columbia River and the Puget Sound.<sup>461</sup>

The town grew rapidly and the Washingtons were active and generous residents. They donated land to build their Baptist church and establish a cemetery, offered no-interest loans to their neighbors, and reserved land for a public square, now called George Washington Park. Washington continued his civic involvement after Mary Jane's death in 1888. When economic crises devastated the nation in the last decades of the nineteenth century, George Washington organized a private relief program for needy Centralia residents and refused to foreclose on mortgages he held. On August 26, 1905, 11 days after his 88<sup>th</sup> birthday, George Washington, the black overland emigrant who went west in search of freedom and opportunity, passed away. His well-attended funeral was held at the Baptist church he supported and helped build, and he was buried in the cemetery located on the land where he had staked a claim some 50 years earlier.

Mary Elizabeth Snelling (Sugg) and William Sugg arrived in California in 1852. Like George Washington, the Suggs would become leading members of their community in Sonora, California. Mary left Missouri as the free-born (or freed) child of a woman who had been enslaved. William went west from Texas as the slave of Francis Trale. They met when their wagon trains arrived in what is now Merced; shortly after that, they began their lives together.

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<sup>461</sup> Oldham, "George and Mary Jane Washington."



Mary Elizabeth Snelling was born in Johnson County, Missouri, on February 4, 1839. (see Appendix, Chapter 5, Photo 3). Like many other black western emigrants, the circumstances of her birth are unclear. Her mother, Julia Snelling, was the slave of William Snelling and Julia maintained that a member of the Snelling family had fathered her daughter, Mary Elizabeth. The white Snelling family (and their descendants) have denied this account. In any event, when 12-year-old Mary Elizabeth, her mother Julia, and her older sister set out for California in the Snelling family wagon as part of a California-bound train, they did so as free (or freed) people.<sup>462</sup>

Mary Elizabeth's grandson, Vernon Sugg McDonald, recalled in a 1964 article he wrote for the Tuolumne County Historical Society that his grandmother had a difficult time crossing the plains when the company encountered Indians who stopped by to trade with them. When Native Americans saw Mary Elizabeth, they thought she was an Indian child who had been kidnapped by the whites. They wanted to rescue her. The wagon train boss, worried that the child's presence would incite violence, ordered Julia to hide the girl when Indians were nearby. Therefore, an empty sugar barrel roped to the side of the wagon became Mary Elizabeth's hiding place. She would squat inside the barrel for hours, enduring a hot, cramped, and tedious ride as the wagon jostled over the trail. McDonald wrote that his grandmother told him she "always hated being put in the barrel" because it was so painful.<sup>463</sup>

Mary Elizabeth would also tell her grandson, "We were never attacked by the Indians, but the two wagon trains just ahead of us had been. We frequently came upon the smoldering frames and broken wheels of freight wagons, and the bloated bodies of horses, broken gear and

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<sup>462</sup> Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 34. Also see "A Negro in Sonora," interview of Vernon Sugg McDonald by Neil Mill, September 9, 1975, in the Tuolumne County Historical Society. Hereafter cited as the McDonald Interview.

<sup>463</sup> Vernon Sugg McDonald, "The Pioneer Sugg Family: The Saga of an Early Day Family of Tuolumne County and the History of One of Sonora's Outstanding Gold Rush Homes," *The Quarterly of the Tuolumne County Historical Society* 4, no. 1 (July-September 1964): 97-98.

sometimes the signs of freshly dug but smoothed over graves.” McDonald wrote that his grandmother told him the Indians did not try to steal the horses or oxen, but the livestock were always “kept inside the circle of wagons every night and a heavy guard of armed men was set up each night around the camp.” She also recounted that instead of fearing Indian attacks, “we were more worried while travelling through Utah when the Mormons made two attempts to stampede the horses because they were short of these animals . . . There was a lot of shouting and shooting on two different nights, but the raids were stopped. No one was shot or injured and the horses were saved.”<sup>464</sup>

Mary Elizabeth’s train also faced cholera. Her party was not affected but she stated, “We were told the two trains ahead of us had had trouble with cholera and the wagon boss ordered the route across the plains changed so the people would not come in contact with the infected areas.” As an added measure of protection, “everybody in the wagon train had to wear a lump of asafoetida [a foul-smelling herb and a common ingredient in many western frontier curatives] in a bag around their necks.”<sup>465</sup>

William Sugg’s overland trek began in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he was born a slave on the estate of Francis Trale. (see Appendix, Chapter 5, Photo 4). Trale brought Sugg with him to Mariposa County during the gold rush era. As a slave, Sugg’s duties on the journey were varied. In addition to serving his owner, he worked as a muleteer and bullwhacker, driving the wagon across the plains. Sugg had been promised freedom when they arrived in the gold country if he worked faithfully for his owner. However, unlike the enormous payments owners usually extracted from most slaves in exchange for freedom, Sugg was inexplicably permitted to purchase his liberty for just one dollar (present-day equivalent of \$26.40). His deed of

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<sup>464</sup> All quotes by Mary Elizabeth are in McDonald, “The Pioneer Sugg Family,” 98; see also Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 34-35.

<sup>465</sup> McDonald, “The Pioneer Sugg Family,” 98.

manumission, which was witnessed and recorded in Tuolumne County, noted that Francis Trale, who signed his name with an “X,” relinquished his ownership of William Sugg “as an act of benevolence.” No mention was made of the fact that California was a free state and did not officially allow slavery.<sup>466</sup>

William Sugg met his future wife in the Merced area, where Mary Elizabeth and her mother were living on the Snelling ranch. William and 15-year-old Mary Elizabeth enjoyed a year-long courtship while attending church and social activities in Merced. They relocated to Sonora, where they were married on January 20, 1855. The newlyweds bought a lot on Theall Street and lived in a small cabin on the northeast corner, adjacent to a stable and barnyard owned by the City Hotel for its stagecoaches, which ran between Stockton, Columbia, and Angels Camp.<sup>467</sup> William, a harness maker by trade, opened a business repairing and restoring leather harnesses. Mary Elizabeth was an accomplished seamstress and earned money by sewing and by giving quilting and sewing lessons to the young women in the community. When a fire destroyed the house next door to their property, they purchased the adjoining lot and began enlarging the house, which was completed in 1857. Always frugal, William built a kiln to make the adobe bricks and fashioned the roof from five-gallon tin cans, which he nailed to the rafters. The Sugg house, one of a handful of adobe structures in Tuolumne County, continued to expand as the family grew between 1855 and 1876 to include 11 children.

In addition to his harness business, William also supported his family by operating a livery stable and a donkey and cart rental business that was run by the city of Sonora’s street-cleaning department. The Suggs also arranged with the Victoria Hotel and the City Hotel to rent

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<sup>466</sup> Beth L. Savage, *African American Historic Places*, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1994), 119; Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 82; Francis Trale to William Sugg, Deed of Manumission, Tuolumne County, Deed Book 2, Page 908, Recorded June 14, 1854.

<sup>467</sup> McDonald, “The Pioneer Sugg Family,” 98.

out rooms to lodgers when the hotels were full. Vernon Sugg McDonald noted that his grandparents did this despite the tight quarters because “the matter of economics became a main factor.” McDonald recalled that “drummers” [traveling salesmen] particularly liked to stay at the Sugg House. This arrangement remained in force until a 1921 law mandated that every commercial room had to have hot and cold running water. The Suggs could not afford the added expense of putting in new plumbing.<sup>468</sup>

William and Mary Elizabeth Sugg were active members of their community, contributing to the church and participating in social events. In the 1850s, William proudly posed for a photograph wearing the regalia of his fraternal organization, the Lion Chapel, Sonora Tribe of the G.O.R. of which he was a trustee. The Sugg family home was crammed with well-perused books and literary works on a variety of subjects. Many of the children were accomplished musicians and played several instruments.<sup>469</sup> William and his wife also became active in the cause of racial equality. William was involved in the California Colored Convention movement that held the first of three meetings in Sacramento in 1855 to protest California’s black laws. William and Mary Elizabeth may well have participated in the anti-black laws political rally, banquet, and fancy-dress ball fundraiser that was held in the nearby town of Columbia in 1859. For the Suggs, as for so many other African American emigrants, the issue of equal education became a main focus. William and Mary Elizabeth joined with other blacks to fight segregation in the public schools. They were among the signers of a petition that demanded the school board equalize the annual school term for black and white students. William Sugg also wrote to the

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<sup>468</sup> McDonald, “The Pioneer Sugg Family,” 98-99; Savage, *National Register of Historic Places*, 119; Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 35, 82. See also The Historical Marker Data Base: Bite-Size Bits of Local, National, and Global History, “Sugg House,” <http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=31861> [accessed September 25, 2010]; and Jeff Jardine, “Mining Mother Lode’s Black History,” *The Modesto Bee*, January 20, 2008.

<sup>469</sup> This information is derived from a personal tour of the Sugg House (April 5, 2004) and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore’s discussions with Bob and Sherry Brennan, current owners of the Sugg House and collection, 2004-2005. Unfortunately, I have been unable to identify William Sugg’s specific fraternal order, or discover the meaning of G.O.R.

state legislature protesting the fact that California law barred his children from the white school in Sonora and the local school board would not establish a school for African American students. African Americans in California would continue to fight against segregation and discrimination in education, but by 1877 William and Mary Elizabeth's children were attending the public school in Sonora along with white children.<sup>470</sup>

For reasons that remain unknown, William left his family in 1877 and moved to Merced after his last child was born. Vernon Sugg McDonald notes that William continued to operate the harness business for another 22 years until he died at the age of 71 in 1889. In order to maintain herself and the children, Mary Elizabeth continued to teach sewing and quilting and converted the family's three-story, seven-bedroom residence into a boarding house. She continued with this for the next 40 years. McDonald recalled that his grandmother was a "strict adherent to the old maxim, 'Church on Sunday, washing on Monday, etc.'" However her exhausting schedule took its toll when, on a cold fall day in 1915, she contracted pneumonia. She died on November 19, 1915.<sup>471</sup>

Of the 11 Sugg children, Rosa Mary Adele, who was born on February 11, 1865, was the only one to move away and marry. She went to Oakland, where she met her husband. When the marriage did not work out, she returned to live in the family home. For three generations, someone from the family lived in the Sugg House which is now listed on the National Register

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<sup>470</sup> Roberts, *Mining for Freedom*, 35, 83; Jardine, "Mining Mother Lode's Black History." For African Americans' fight against segregation in California's public schools, see Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 215-216; Marilyn K. Demas, *Ungraded School No. 2 Colored: The African American Struggle for Education in Victorian Sacramento* (Sacramento: Sacramento County Historical Society, 1999), especially 21-78; Susan Bragg, "Knowledge is Power: Sacramento Blacks the Public Schools, 1854-1860," *California History* 75, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 214-221.

<sup>471</sup> McDonald, "The Pioneer Sugg Family," 99; Roberts, *Mining for Gold*, 35.

of Historic Places. This long family history came to an end on May 21, 1982 with the death of Vernon Sugg McDonald who was the last family member to live in the Sugg house.<sup>472</sup>

### **Making a Place for Themselves**

An essential part of the freedom black overlanders sought when their journey ended was the opportunity to carve out an economic and social place for themselves in their new homes. The stories of Ben Palmer in Nevada, Clara Brown and Barney L. Ford in Colorado, and David Brown in California and his wife, Rachel, in Ohio, are evidence of this aspect of the black emigrants' quest.

Nevada settler Ben Palmer, who could neither read or write, became one of the wealthiest and most respected men in Nevada's Carson Valley. (see Appendix, Chapter 5, Photo 5). He lived in Genoa, Douglas County, near present-day Carson City. He also paved the way for more black settlement in the area. He, his sister Charlotte, and Charlotte's white husband, David (D. H.) Barber, settled in the area sometime in 1853. Palmer's birth date and place and his early life are cloaked in mystery. Some accounts claim that he was born in 1817 in South Carolina and others state he was born in Illinois in the late 1820s. A Carson Valley historian and anthropologist, Grace Dangberg, has suggested that Ben Palmer and his sister were Missouri slaves who managed to purchase their freedom. The 1875 Nevada state census identifies Palmer as a 46-year-old farmer born in Illinois. Charlotte is identified in the census as a 50-year-old woman who was born in South Carolina.<sup>473</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> McDonald, "The Pioneer Sugg Family," 98; Roberts, *Mining for Gold*, 35; Savage, *National Register of Historic Places*, 119.

<sup>473</sup> See for example, Julia Henning Larsen, "Ben Palmer (c. 1817-1908)," The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/palmer-ben-c-1817-1908> [accessed September 23, 2010]; Joyce Devore, "Old Alpine County Barn Finds new Purpose as a Home," Gardnerville, Nevada *Record Courier*, January 29, 2010, <http://www.recordcourier.com/article/20100129/ALPINE/100129646> [accessed September 24, 2010]; Ed Johnson and Elmer R. Rusco, "The First Black Rancher: Ben Palmer and a Group of Black Pioneers Made their Marks in the 1800s," *Historical Nevada Magazine: Outstanding Historical Features from the Pages of Nevada Magazine*

All accounts of Palmer's life agree that around 1853, he joined the hordes of prospective Argonauts who set out for the California gold fields. He most likely departed from Missouri, and his trip across the plains appears to have been a family affair. He may have traveled with Charlotte and David, or the two men may have set out together and Charlotte joined them later. Upon reaching the verdant Carson Valley (which was at that time western Utah Territory), Palmer and David changed their plans about going to California and decided to settle there, where they could raise cattle and feed to supply the lucrative market created by the steady stream of emigrants who rolled across the Carson Trail. Palmer, a skilled cattleman and drover, became the first known African American to settle in the valley and one of a small group of black ranchers who came to live in Nevada in the nineteenth century.<sup>474</sup>

In 1853, Ben Palmer claimed 320 acres of choice grassland just south of Genoa, and Charlotte and David Barber settled on 400 acres of equally desirable land adjacent to Palmer's homestead. The couple had at least one child, Benjamin Barber, who was born on the homestead in 1853. Palmer claimed water rights for his property, and he and David constructed ditches and dams to control the water in the area. Palmer sold grazing privileges to the emigrants who drove their oxen, horses, mules, and other livestock through the area during the spring and early autumn. Being a skilled horseman, he also raised horses and introduced a rare breed known as the Bonner horse to the area. Palmer and Barber employed black, Indian and white ranch hands to work for them on their homesteads. By 1857, business was booming and Palmer drove 1,500 head of cattle from Seattle down to his spread in Carson Valley to restock his severely depleted herd. The next year, he was on the trail again, this time driving a large herd north. The local

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(Carson City: Nevada Magazine, a Division of the Nevada Commission on Tourism, 1998), 82. This article was originally published in *Nevada Magazine* (January-February, 1989): 26-27; Grace Dangberg, *Carson Valley—Historical Sketches of Nevada's First Settlement* (Reno: A. Carlisle and Co., 1972). The 1875 state census is quoted in Rusco, "Good Time Coming?," 143.

<sup>474</sup> Larsen, "Ben Palmer"; Devore, "Old Alpine County Barn."

newspaper reported, “Ben Parmer’s [sic] cattle—450 head—passed through Genoa last Tuesday on their way to Goose Lake, Oregon.”<sup>475</sup>

In 1857, the tax records listed Palmer as one of the 47 largest taxpayers in Douglas County (with assessed valuations of \$5,000 or more—the present day equivalent of \$127,000) and ranked him tenth in the value of his property. By 1867, the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* called Palmer “one of the heaviest taxpayers in Douglas County.”<sup>476</sup> Over the next five years, his personal and real estate worth increased considerably. While David Barber’s ranch was not nearly as profitable as Palmer’s, it continued to yield a handsome profit each year. After 1873, when David died, his son, Benjamin, ran the ranch for the next three decades.<sup>477</sup>

Despite Nevada’s laws that prevented blacks from voting until 1870, and other anti-black restrictions, Ben Palmer appears to have been a trailblazer for black settlement in the Carson Valley. By 1860, at least two other black families had moved there. One of them was Winfield and Sophia Miller and their children (the other black pioneer family is unknown) who homesteaded a ranch adjacent to the spreads of Palmer and Barber. The number of black Nevadans would grow by the end of the century.<sup>478</sup> Charlotte Barber died in 1887, and her funeral was reported as one of the largest to be held in Douglas County. Ben Palmer died in 1908 at the age of 82. They were buried in the Mottsville Cemetery, just south of Genoa, where David Barber, Charlotte, and David’s seven children were also interred.

Like Ben Palmer, Virginia-born Clara Brown (who was briefly discussed in Chapter 2), could not read or write, but was undaunted by the prospect of going west. Family ties also played a part in her story of emigration. Born on January 1, 1800 near Fredericksburg, Virginia, Brown

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<sup>475</sup> Johnson and Rusco, “The First Black Rancher,” 82-84.

<sup>476</sup> *Territorial Enterprise* quoted in Johnson and Rusco, “The First Black Rancher,” 83; Ibid. for 1857 tax records.

<sup>477</sup> The 1875 state census quoted in Rusco, “*Good Time Coming?*,” 143; Johnson and Rusco, “The First Black Rancher,” 83-84.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 84.



grew up as a slave in Logan County, Kentucky. (see Appendix, Chapter 5, Photo 6). Her owner, Ambrose Smith, died when she was 36 years old, and her husband, two daughters and a son were sold away to settle his estate. Brown herself was sold to a series of owners, including George Brown, who would be her last master. Upon George Brown's death in 1856, Clara was manumitted at the age of 56. Prohibited by law from remaining in Kentucky as a free woman, she packed her belongings and boarded a flatboat bound for St. Louis, Missouri. There the heirs of her former owner had arranged for her employment as a domestic servant in the household of Jacob Brunner, a hardware merchant, and his wife, Sarah. This began Brown's nearly three decades-long search for her child, Eliza Jane.<sup>479</sup>

In 1857, the Brunners relocated to Leavenworth, Kansas, taking Clara with them. However, the following year when the Brunners decided to set out for California, Clara Brown declined to accompany them. She remained in Leavenworth, where she started a laundry business. Her plan was to save some money and then strike out for newly created Arapahoe County (Colorado), where gold had been discovered in the Pike's Peak area. She believed her daughter might have settled there. In Leavenworth, Brown persuaded a group of Colorado-bound prospectors to hire her on as a cook and laundress for their wagon company, headed by Colonel Wadsworth. So in the spring of 1859, Clara Brown packed all her belongings, including her laundry pots, and at the age of 59 (at least a decade older than most emigrant women), became part of a 60-person caravan of wagons crossing the plains to Denver. She did laundry for the company and cooked for 26 men in the train. The rest of the men either got their own meals or made arrangements to eat with other families in the party. For much of the 700-mile trek she,

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<sup>479</sup> For a detailed account of Clara Brown's life, see Baker, *Clara an Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*. An older, cliché-ridden, but still useful biography of Clara Brown is Bruyn's *'Aunt' Clara Brown: Story of a Black Pioneer*, especially 1-4, 13-35.

like most other overlanders, walked alongside the wagons. Clara Brown and company arrived in Denver (then called Cherry Creek) in June 1859.<sup>480</sup>

By 1860, she had established herself as an important figure in the Denver-area community. Her business skills and investment acumen provided her with an economic independence few black women knew. Six months after entering Denver, she relocated to the gold fields in Central City (Mountain City) and began her laundry. In October 1860, she purchased a lot in the Gregory Gulch area, paying \$50 cash (2009 equivalent of \$1,330), and built a house on it. This would not be the last property she would buy.<sup>481</sup> By 1865, she had saved \$10,000 (2009 equivalent of \$136,000) from laundry, catering, cooking, and cleaning businesses and investments. Clara Brown's wealth could have allowed her to lead a self-indulgent life of relative ease; instead, she chose to help build the community in which she lived, providing assistance to blacks, whites, and Indians. Her generous nature earned her the title "Angel of the Rockies."<sup>482</sup>

Brown, although illiterate, became an astute businesswoman because she was bright, talented, and always alert for opportunity. She also honed her skills with the guidance of two other black overlanders who had arrived in Colorado some time before she did. Lorenzo Bowman, who had been a slave in Missouri and worked in the lead mines, and Jeremiah Lee, who was probably freeborn in Virginia and settled for a time in Missouri, became her friends and

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<sup>480</sup> Bruyn, 'Aunt' Clara Brown, 21-25; Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 27; Shanti Zaid, "Aunt Clara Brown," Colorado Historical Society, [http://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/files/Kids\\_Students/Bios/Aunt\\_Clara\\_Brown.pdf](http://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/files/Kids_Students/Bios/Aunt_Clara_Brown.pdf) [accessed September 24, 2010]; Katz, *The Black West*, 77; Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 136-138.

<sup>481</sup> Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 32-33.

<sup>482</sup> Tricia Martineau Wagner, "Clara Brown (1803-1885)," The Black Past: An Online Reference Guide to African American History, BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?=aaw/brown-clara-1803-1885> [accessed September 24, 2010]; Lisa Keipp, "Clara Brown, a Colorado Pioneer, Part 1," *Colorado History Examiner*, Examiner.com, February 18, 2010, <http://www.examiner.com/history-in-denver/clara-brown-a-colorado-pioneer> [accessed September 24, 2010].

business mentors in Colorado. (see Appendix, Chapter 5, Photo 7). Bowman and Lee had garnered considerable expertise in the process of mining and smelting ore while working in Missouri's lead mines. The two had traveled separately overland to Colorado, where they met and became partners in several real estate and mining enterprises. They made sound investments in residential property and in 1867 built and operated the Red, White and Blue Smelting Company in Leavenworth Gulch in Central City. The venture met with moderate success. That same year, Bowman and Lee also started the Red, White and Blue Mining Company, which was a group of black men who operated in nearby Georgetown. Bowman and Lee constructed and owned the first road over Burrell Hill, a main mining road that was used for many years and over which millions of dollars of ore were transported. Bowman, who died in 1870, and Lee, who lived in Central City until his death in 1904, were among the wealthiest men in the territory. Brown's association with them was friendly and profitable. She invested much of her money into residential real estate and mining claims and was able to sell many of her holdings at a profit before the mining and property boom collapsed in 1864.<sup>483</sup>

Clara Brown's home and business in Central City became the hubs of the community and provided safe havens for those in need. She often tended to sick and injured miners, regardless of race, who sought out her help. Her home also served as an unofficial hospital where the ill and infirm could recuperate under her care. She opened her doors to the homeless who needed a safe, clean place to stay. Brown also cared for pregnant women who benefited from her midwifery skills. All of these services were provided free of charge for those who could not afford to pay.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>483</sup> Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 44-45, 48-51, 69.

<sup>484</sup> Zaid, "Aunt Clara Brown."

Clara Brown was a devout and ecumenical Christian, contributing time, effort, and money to the building and maintenance of at least four different churches in the Denver and Central City areas. She established a Sunday school in Denver, and after moving to Central City, helped establish the Presbyterian Union Sunday School there. She also contributed \$100 (present-day equivalent of \$2,660) to the building fund of the Congregational Church in Central City. Several years later, she provided financial assistance of \$50 when the church was re-dedicated after a fire. She also gave money to the Catholic Church in the town. Brown's two-room log cabin on Lawrence Street where she operated her laundry became the first home of the Methodist Church in Central City. In 1860, she opened her home to weekly Methodist services, and became a founding member of the congregation. She bestowed her largest financial contribution on the St. James Methodist Church in Central City.<sup>485</sup>

Clara Brown's generosity extended to former slaves who were in need. Some were her relatives, others were friends, and many were strangers who needed help. She settled more than a dozen black families in the Denver area, bringing them out from the South by train or wagon caravans at her own expense. Some she boarded in her own home. During her decades-long search for her daughter, Brown managed to locate some 26 relatives and friends and paid \$4,000 (present-day equivalent of \$55,800) to transport them by rail to Leavenworth, Kansas, then overland by wagon train to Colorado.<sup>486</sup>

At least one black overlander who was on the trail at the same time had witnessed Brown's trek across the plains with her loved ones. Mrs. Eliza Smith Gilmore, the "daughter of free colored parents of Cleveland, Ohio," related in a 1961 interview that she and her mother had traveled from Kansas City to a "small freighting town in Kansas," where her mother purchased

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<sup>485</sup> Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 36-37; Zaid, "Aunt Clara Brown." See also Keipp, "Clara Brown, Part 1."

<sup>486</sup> Coleman, "A History of Blacks in Utah, 1825-1910," 53-56.

outfitting supplies and hired a driver for their overland journey. Gilmore's mother learned that another wagon train was just ahead of them on the road, but was assured that she could overtake them because the other group's wagons "were drawn by oxen" and theirs used mules. Gilmore recalled the moment her party caught up with the other wagon company on the plain: "It was there we met Aunt Clara Brown, who was bringing her covered wagon with emancipated slaves, at her own expense, from Leavenworth Kansas, back to Central City, Colorado. They brought twenty or thirty people at a time."<sup>487</sup> This was the first of several black wagon trains that Clara Brown would sponsor.<sup>488</sup> She helped the new arrivals find jobs and in some instances paid for their education. Brown and Jackson Smith, a black settler that she had brought back from Kentucky in one of her caravans, contributed money to support several African American women attending Oberlin College in Ohio. Many of these students had been part of the wagon train that she had organized.<sup>489</sup>

Clara Brown's most important quest, however, was to find Eliza Jane, the daughter who had been sold away from her. In 1879, Brown moved from Central City (her home for 20 years) back to Denver, where she continued her search. She offered a reward of \$10,000 (present day equivalent of \$136,600) to anyone who could bring her news of her child. In 1882, the *Denver Republican* newspaper reported that Brown had received a letter from a "colored woman" in Council Bluffs, Iowa, informing her that her daughter, now Mrs. Eliza Jane Brewer, was living there. Brown was "almost overwhelmed with joy," and telegraphed Eliza Jane that she would meet her in Council Bluffs as quickly as she could make travel arrangements. Because her life-

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<sup>487</sup> Joseph Atkins, *Human Relations in Colorado* (Denver: Colorado State Department of Education, 1961), 15. This 1961 interview was done for a pamphlet on ethnic diversity in Colorado. The quotes from Gilmore are also in Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 57.

<sup>488</sup> Katz, *The Black West*, 77-79.

<sup>489</sup> Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 57-61, 75-84; Zaid, "Aunt Clara Brown"; Wagner, "Clara Brown"; Lisa Keipp, "Clara Brown, A Colorado Pioneer, Part Two," *Colorado History Examiner*, <http://www.examiner.com/history-in-denver/clara-brown-a-colorado-pioneer-part-two> [accessed September 24, 2010].

long search, her charitable work, disastrous fires, and unscrupulous legal dealings had taken a heavy toll on her finances, she had to rely on the fund-raising efforts of friends and neighbors to raise the \$100 (2009 equivalent of \$2,160) for her train fare.<sup>490</sup>

At the age of 82, Clara Brown boarded the train in Denver and once again crossed the plains, arriving in Council Bluffs where she was reunited with her 57-year-old daughter. Eliza Jane introduced Brown to one of her granddaughters. The *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* newspaper described the reunion:

Yesterday morning, on the Denver Short Line train, Mrs. Brown arrived in Council Bluffs and proceeded to the residence of her daughter. She came up on the street car, and when at the corner of Broadway and Eighth street her long-lost child was pointed out to her, standing on the crossing. With a scream she jumped from her seat, rushed out of the car, and in an ecstasy of joy mother and child were collapsed in each other's arms. Unheeding the lookers-on, unheeding the mud in the streets, clasped in each other's arms, they sat down. The sight was one at once amusing and touching. In that embrace the joys and sorrows of a life-time were forgotten, and only the present thought of.<sup>491</sup>

Brown, Eliza Jane, and at least one granddaughter traveled back to Denver where Brown now lived. In 1885, when a reporter from the *Denver Tribune Republican* asked Brown when she had last seen her husband, she replied, "I don't remember just when. He was sold nearly thirty years ago. I don't know where they took him. I had four children, too, darlin'. They sold them too." Eliza Jane was the only child Brown ever found.<sup>492</sup> Clara Brown died in her home at 607

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<sup>490</sup> The *Denver Republican*, February 18, 1882, story reprinted in Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 89; Karen A. Johnson, "Undaunted Courage and Faith: The Lives of Three Black Women in the West and Hawaii in the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century," *The Journal of African American History* 91, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 11-12.

<sup>491</sup> *Council Bluffs NonPareil*, quoted in the *Denver Republican*, March 4, 1882. See Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 87.

<sup>492</sup> Clara Brown Interview, *Denver Tribune Republican*, June 26, 1885.

Arapahoe Street in Denver in October 1885, surrounded by friends and family members, some of whom she had personally escorted across the plains to freedom in the West.<sup>493</sup>

When Barney Launcelot Ford arrived in Denver in 1860, Clara Brown was there to give him a hand. (see Appendix, Chapter 5, Photo 8). Ford made his first attempt to come west in 1851 by the sea-land route during the California gold rush (see Chapter 3). However, after a stay in Nicaragua where he operated a successful hotel and a brief return to Chicago, he set out for the West once more in 1860. This time he turned his sights to Colorado, which was experiencing a boom because of the gold discovery there. He sold his Chicago livery business for \$2,200 (the present-day equivalent of \$58,600), divided the profits equally with his wife, Julia (who would temporarily remain in Chicago with their two children, Lewis Napoleon and Sadie), and at the age of 38 boarded a train bound for the Missouri River. He hoped to go to Fort Leavenworth and purchase a ticket on the stagecoach to Denver. However, the stage line refused to transport black passengers no matter how much money they had. Ford waited in Fort Leavenworth to find a Denver-bound wagon company.<sup>494</sup>

In April 1860, he signed on to cook for an emigrant train of 22 wagons, in exchange for free transportation. The majority of the company consisted of pro-slavery southerners with whom Ford sometimes clashed. Guiding the train was an experienced frontiersman named Sorepaw Beck, who had led a dozen companies across the plains as far as Oregon. However, he suffered a rattlesnake bite and had to be left at Fort Kearny under medical care. After making their way for a while without a guide, Uriah Coventry was elected wagon boss and the group continued its slow journey along the trail.<sup>495</sup>

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<sup>493</sup> Newspaper accounts quoted in Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 97-98.

<sup>494</sup> Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 43; Parkhill, *Mister Barney Ford*, 77, 80.

<sup>495</sup> Parkhill, *Mister Barney Ford*, 79-91.

When he arrived in Denver on May 18, 1860, Ford found it to be little more than a frontier boom town filled with log huts and tents. He quickly moved on to the gold region of Mountain City in the Pike's Peak country, where he encountered thousands of other gold-seekers. Because he was black, he was unable to rent a room in any of the makeshift hotels that had sprung up there. He sought out Clara Brown, who had preceded him to Colorado and now owned a thriving laundry. Brown allowed Ford to sleep in her woodshed free of charge until he could make other arrangements. Ford began prospecting in the Gregory Gulch region but met with hostility from the white miners. The law did not recognize the rights of blacks to file mining claims, so Ford had no legal recourse when white men jumped his claim and ran him away from the diggings. He moved on to Breckenridge and tried again to prospect at French Gulch, where he encountered similar hostility.<sup>496</sup>

Undeterred, Ford revised his plans. He moved to Denver with his wife and children, who had now joined him. Realizing that the gold boom with its influx of people to the area provided the perfect opportunity for business, he launched his new career as a western businessman. Colorado law prohibited African Americans from owning claims but no such provision prevented blacks from owning real estate. In 1862, Ford bought a building in downtown Denver and opened his first barbershop, drawing on the trade he had learned in Chicago. Ford's barbershop catered to some of the area's leading citizens, who were impressed with his "eloquent speech and worldly knowledge."<sup>497</sup> Historian Quintard Taylor has noted that barbering was a

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<sup>496</sup> For a description of Denver and the mountain mining districts, see Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 25-26, 43; Parkhill, *Mr. Barney Ford*, 97; Modupe Labode, Chief Historian, Colorado Historical Society, "Barney Ford's Legacy Still a Presence Today," Colorado Historical Society, February 16, 2006, <http://www.denver.yourhub.com/Littleton/Stories/News/Print-Content~53835> [accessed September 23, 2010]; Brooke Cleary, "Barney L. Ford: Runaway Slave, Denver Pioneer," Colorado Historical Society, adapted from "Barney Ford—From Plantation Slave to Denver Leader," by David F. Halaas, *Colorado History NOW*, October 2000, <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/44329510/BARNEY-FORD> [accessed September 23, 2010].

<sup>497</sup> Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 43; Labode, "Barney Ford's Legacy." The quote is from Cleary, "Barney L. Ford."



desirable business for African Americans because it offered them status and financial independence. By the end of the decade, many other black Denverites had followed in Ford's entrepreneurial footsteps. The 1870 census showed that Denver-area black barbers made up 65 percent of the territory's barbers.<sup>498</sup>

In April 1863, Barney Ford's barbershop was consumed in the great fire that swept through much of Denver, destroying lives and property. Ford started over after securing a loan of \$9,000 (2009 equivalent of \$159,000) from local banker Luther Kountze, who charged him 25 percent interest. In August 1863, he opened a grander establishment, the People's Restaurant, at 1514 Blake Street in downtown Denver. His new venture also included a saloon upstairs and a shaving and hairdressing salon in the basement. It was an immediate hit and he was able to repay the loan in 90 days. He advertised that the restaurant and other shops would offer customers "the most choice and delicate luxuries of Colorado and the East."<sup>499</sup>

In 1867, Ford ventured to Cheyenne, the capital of Wyoming Territory, to build another restaurant. The new place thrived from the increased traffic brought to the area by the extension of the railroad to the territory. However, in 1870 when that restaurant was destroyed by fire, Ford returned to Denver and opened several new businesses including the luxurious Inter-Ocean Hotel located on the corner of Sixteenth and Blake streets. A contemporary described the place as the "aristocratic hostelry of Denver." (see Appendix, Chapter 5, Photo 9). During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, Ford would open several more businesses, including barbershops, restaurants, and hotels in San Francisco, Breckenridge, and again in Wyoming. However, many of them floundered and folded because of the economic turbulence of the boom and bust cycles that wracked the last half of the century. His Inter-Ocean Hotel in Denver and his

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<sup>498</sup> Labode, "Barney Ford's Legacy"; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 203.

<sup>499</sup> Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 43; Cleary, "Barney L. Ford"; People's Restaurant advertisement, quoted in Labode, "Barney Ford's Legacy."

Restaurant and Chop House in nearby Breckenridge were the most consistently successful of his ventures. Ford's business holdings made him one of the wealthiest and most influential African Americans in Colorado. His entrepreneurial skills earned him the nickname "The Black Baron of Colorado."<sup>500</sup>

Barney Ford made an economic place for himself and his family in the West, but he was not content to rest on these accomplishments. He, like other African Americans, knew that success and independence were inextricably linked to full civil and political rights. Ford joined other black westerners, including his old friend and brother-in-law, Henry Wagoner, in fighting against the law that prohibited black men from exercising the franchise in the territories. He was also in the forefront of the campaign to abolish school segregation. In 1868 Ford used his influence and standing to travel to Washington, D.C., to persuade members of Congress and President Andrew Johnson to reject Colorado's bid for statehood until the state constitution clearly guaranteed all male citizens, regardless of race, the right to vote. With the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, African Americans now became citizens with legally recognized rights under the constitution—in theory, at least—and would be able to vote in all territories and states. The ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 ensured voting rights for all male citizens of the United States. When Colorado was granted statehood in 1876, its constitution did not contain any racial prohibitions on voting. A little more than a decade after his arrival in Colorado, Ford had become a political force. He was chosen by the Colorado Republican Party Central Committee to run for a seat in the Territorial House of Representatives. His bid, though unsuccessful, was notable because he was the first African American to run for

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<sup>500</sup> Baker, *Clara: An Ex-Slave in Gold Rush Colorado*, 43-44; Cleary, *ibid.*; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 203. The original quote regarding the Inter-Ocean hotel is in Frank Hall, *History of the State of Colorado* (Chicago: Blakely Printing, 1895), vol. 4, 441; Moya Hansen, "Ford, Barney L. (1822-1902)"; John Hafnor, "Colorado's Black Baron Stood Tall," in *Strange But True, Colorado: Weird Tales of the Wild West*, (Fort Collins, Col.: Lone Pine Productions, 2005), 26. See also National Park Service, "Barney L. Ford Building."

elected office in Colorado. He also was the first black man to serve on a grand jury in the state.<sup>501</sup>

In addition to challenging the laws that restricted black rights, Ford immersed himself in the tasks of community building. He and Julia were founding members of the Zion Baptist Church, which opened its doors in the Five Points area of Denver on November 15, 1865. Because he never forgot his long years of bondage, the fear of being a fugitive slave, and his work on the Underground Railroad, Ford joined with other members of the community in assisting hundreds of former slaves who streamed into Colorado during the Civil War. He was one of the founders of an adult education program that taught freedmen and women to read and write. The literacy program was the first of its kind in Colorado Territory and undoubtedly held special significance for Ford. As a slave, he had secretly learned to read when his mother, Phoebe, stole a dictionary from the owner's home where she worked and enlisted the help of a self-taught slave on a neighboring plantation to teach her young son.<sup>502</sup>

In 1879, the Ford family relocated to Breckenridge, Colorado, but returned to Denver in 1890. In 1899, Julia Ford died of pneumonia. Three years later Barney Ford passed away after suffering a stroke. Both were buried in Denver's Riverside Cemetery.

Barney Ford rose from slavery to become one of the wealthiest and respected men in Colorado. For Ford, the West became a place where he, as a free man, could build a decent life for himself and his family and smooth the way for others who followed. Ford's contributions to his new community suggest that for African Americans, the West's promise of new opportunities

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<sup>501</sup> Cleary, "Barney L. Ford"; Labode, "Barney Ford's Legacy"; Hansen, "Barney L. Ford"; Hafnor, *Strange But True Colorado*, 26.

<sup>502</sup> Zion Baptist Church, "Historical Sketch," Zion Baptist Church & Ministries, 2008, [http://www.zionbaptistchurchdenver.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id](http://www.zionbaptistchurchdenver.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id) [accessed September 23, 2010]; Labode, "Barney Ford's Legacy"; Parkhill, *Mister Barney Ford*, 7-12. See also Five Points Business District, "The History of Five Points," <http://www.fivepointsbiz.org/history-culture.html> [accessed September 23, 2010].

carried with it an obligation to remember the past and build on it. Reflecting on his long, multifaceted life, Barney Ford declared, “We shall not fail our future by losing our past.”<sup>503</sup>

Like Barney L. Ford, Ohio resident David Brown was lured across the plains by gold. Leaving his wife behind in Lancaster, Ohio, Brown trekked to California’s gold region in 1852. His wife, Rachel, carried on a lively correspondence with him while he was in California, but never went west herself. Unfortunately, none of David’s letters to his wife have been uncovered, but Rachel’s extraordinary letters offer rare glimpses into the hopes and fears that accompanied African American overlanders on their journey, and provide intimate evidence of the life-changing consequences overland emigration could have for loved ones who stayed at home. Moreover, Rachel’s writings underscore and challenge the nexus of race, gender, and class that stigmatized African American women in the nineteenth century.

David Brown was born in Hampshire County, Virginia (now West Virginia), in 1812. He carried freedom papers that said he was “aged twenty-two years, five feet, eight inches high, with pleasant countenance, a scar on the forefinger of the left hand, a scar on the shin of each leg, and born free.” Brown’s documents were officially certified and attested to by John B. White, clerk of the Hampshire County Court, and John Brady, “a Justice of the Peace for the said county” on October 27, 1834.<sup>504</sup> Historian John Mark Lambertson of the National Frontier Trails Museum in Independence, Missouri, notes, “nothing else is known about his background.”<sup>505</sup> We know, however, that 15 of David Brown’s white neighbors with whom he had a “life long

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<sup>503</sup> Barney L. Ford, quoted in the Barney Ford House Museum, Town of Breckenridge, <http://www.townofbreckenridge.com/index.aspx?page=211> [accessed September 23, 2010]. Hereafter cited as Breckenridge, “Barney Ford House Museum.” This saying is posted over the door at the museum, which is located in the Ford home in the city of Breckenridge, Colorado.

<sup>504</sup> The description of Brown’s freedom papers is from Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazer of California*, 87.

<sup>505</sup> John Mark Lambertson, “I Remain Your Affectionate Wife: David and Rachel Brown and the California Gold Rush,” from notes “What We Know of David and Rachel Brown.” Notes compiled for the exhibit at the National Frontier Trails Museum, Independence, Missouri. Hereafter cited as Lambertson, “David Brown Exhibit Notes.” Thanks to John Mark Lambertson for providing me with this material.

acquaintance” attested to his “rectitude and propriety, honesty and industry” in an 1834 document they all signed and gave to him before he departed Hampshire County, Virginia.<sup>506</sup>

In 1848, David Brown settled in Lancaster, Ohio, a small community 33 miles southeast of Columbus. On Christmas Eve, 1848, he married Rachel Ann Johnson, a free black woman who was born in Ohio about 1825. Rachel was born to free parents, Samuel and Sarah Johnson. Samuel Johnson was a farmer and a shoemaker who died when Rachel was five years old. Sarah later married Scipio Smith, who worked as a “tinner” and was prominent in Lancaster’s black church community. As newlyweds, David and Rachel lived with Sarah and Scipio Smith in Lancaster, Ohio.<sup>507</sup> Despite Ohio’s free-state status and the active abolitionist community that developed in the area, an intractable minority of the state’s white population came from the South and staunchly supported slavery. In 1850, Lancaster’s African American population totaled 187 and whites numbered 3,296. As Rachel’s letters to David convey, the Brown family and other blacks in Lancaster lived in a community where some whites harbored pro-slavery sentiments, and in a state where African Americans were unwelcome residents. The Browns would have been well aware of the racial hostility that frequently erupted into violence against black Ohioans in the antebellum era.<sup>508</sup>

In 1852, David Brown decided to try his luck in the gold fields of California. He, like most other black overland travelers, set out for California with expectations not only of riches, but of greater opportunity and freedom. How he financed his overland journey is unknown, but he paid \$150 (the equivalent of \$4,300 present-day) to be outfitted. He then joined a company of “forty-two men . . . , six wagons and 65 horses,” that was setting out for California’s gold

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<sup>506</sup> “Recommendation for David Brown, About to Migrate to Ohio, Signed by Certain County Residents, Oct. 27, 1834, Hampshire County, Virginia.” The document is located in Honeyman Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>507</sup> Lambertson, “David Brown Exhibit Notes.”

<sup>508</sup> Ibid. Also see Chapter 1 of this report.

fields.<sup>509</sup> Brown's overland company was organized by Thomas Sturgeon and Samuel Crim, two prominent white Lancaster businessmen.<sup>510</sup> The agreement Brown signed in February 1852 stated that Sturgeon and Crim organized the overland trip because of "the anxiety of various persons residing in and near Lancaster Ohio, to emigrate to Marysville, in California; and [because of] the difficulty of procuring passage by water."<sup>511</sup> Sturgeon and Crim therefore agreed to "unite themselves together as partners for the purpose of transporting from Lancaster to Marysville . . . a company of emigrants."<sup>512</sup> The record does not indicate any other African Americans in Brown's party.

After traveling overland from Lancaster to Cincinnati, then by steamboat to St. Louis, Brown's company unsuccessfully attempted to book passage up the Missouri River. They were able to ship the "wagons, harness, provisions, and 24 mules they had bought to St. Joseph, MO." Unfortunately for the company, the steamboat carrying their cargo sank, resulting in the loss of a large number of animals and provisions. However, Brown and 28 other men trudged on across Missouri with the remaining horses and supplies. Upon reaching St. Joseph, the gold fields-bound group "jumped off" for California in April 1852. They traveled through Salt Lake City and arrived in Downieville, California, just 60 miles from Marysville, in September 1852.<sup>513</sup>

Shortly after his arrival in California, David Brown began to settle into his new life as a miner. According to a receipt from local merchants, Jackson's Jo. Wright & Co., one of his first purchases in Downieville was a pair of boots for eight dollars and two pairs of socks for two dollars. He was able to reduce his \$10 tab (the present-day equivalent of \$286) "by Sawing

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<sup>509</sup> Lambertson, "David Brown Exhibit Notes." Another source stated that Brown's company started out with 100 horses and mules and 44 riders on horseback. See E. H. Colburn, *History of Fairfield County, Ohio, Past and Present* (1883; repr., Knightstown, Ind.: Bookmark, 1977), 374.

<sup>510</sup> Colburn, *History of Fairfield County, Ohio*, 334.

<sup>511</sup> Document of agreement between Thomas Sturgeon, Samuel Crim and David Brown, February 28, 1852, in Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers of California*, 87.

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>513</sup> Lambertson, "David Brown Exhibit Notes."

wood” for the shop, which credited him four dollars for his work.<sup>514</sup> Later that year, Brown purchased a “Silver Hunting watch” for \$20 from a Downieville resident, Ernest Zoller.<sup>515</sup> In July 1853, David Brown bought “two [mining] claims of thirty full front” for the sum of \$50 (present-day equivalent of \$1,430). His claims also came with “one half wheel-Barrow, one Rocker, two Picks, & two Shovels” and “one-half of the Cabin, Stove, Cooking utensils[,] dishes[,] Y&C [etc.]”<sup>516</sup>

By 1854, Brown had formed a partnership (one of several he would enter over the next decade) with George M. Rollin, whose race is unknown. The two men purchased for \$440 (present-day equivalent of \$11,600) the “Hydraulic & drifting Claims situated South of Downieville on the Hillside and known as the Teibbe, Brown & Co[.] Claims.”<sup>517</sup> In June 1855, he paid \$150 (present-day equivalent of \$3,840) for a quarter-interest in the William Berryman & Co. sluicing claims located at “Coiotoville [Coyoteville] on the Bank of the Yuba River.”<sup>518</sup> In 1857, he and a business partner, Stephen Campbell (whose race is unknown), jointly owned a ranch located “North West of Cayotoville [Coyoteville]” where they cut oak and pine timber and sold it in Downieville.<sup>519</sup>

Brown was only nominally successful as a miner, but over the next decade he proved to be a solid businessman, buying and selling mining claims, equipment, and property. Within five years of arriving in California, he had established himself as a respected member of the

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<sup>514</sup> Bill to David Brown, Mar. 4, 1853, Edwin Grabhorn Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>515</sup> Bill of Sale of a watch from Ernest Zoller, April 30, 1853, Edwin Grabhorn Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>516</sup> Bill of Sale to David Brown signed by John Calvert, Josiah Calvert, Matthew Corothers, July 26, 1853, Edwin Grabhorn Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>517</sup> Bill of Sale to David Brown and George M. Rollin, signed by Geo. A. Booth and I. Hixson, dated May 1, 1854, Honeyman Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>518</sup> Bill of Sale to David Brown, signed by Moses I. Harris, dated June 2, 1855, Edwin Grabhorn Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>519</sup> Article of Agreement entered into by David Brown and Stephen Campbell and William A. Jackson, dated July 27, 1857, Edwin Grabhorn Collection, University of California, The Bancroft Library.

community, earning a reputation for reliability and trustworthiness. He was able to secure credit and loans for his mining and other business dealings, and by December 1855, he had made the final payment of \$180 (the present-day equivalent of \$4,610) for the Coyoteville property purchased in June of that year. This represented payment “in full for a Claim and in full of all demands against him up to this date.” In February 1857, Brown entered into a land transaction with his mining partner, Charles Thomas Millard (whose race is unknown), in which Brown agreed to pay \$225 (present-day equivalent of \$5,710) in installments over a period of nine months.<sup>520</sup> David Brown’s credit-worthiness also was in good standing at the Downieville saloon of William Wilkerson, who allowed Brown to run a bar tab. During the period December 3, 1856, through January, 5, 1857, Brown imbibed nine “cocktails” and “1 glass [of] Porter” for a total of \$2.50 (present-day equivalent of \$63.40 ). On January 5, 1857, Wilkerson “received payment of the above a/c [account] in full up to this date.”<sup>521</sup>

At least on one occasion, Brown loaned money to a business associate, Richard James (whose race is unknown). A June 1855 note addressed to Brown from another business partner, Charles Millard, indicates that Brown authorized Millard to collect from James a debt of \$18.52 (present-day equivalent of \$482). Millard succeeded in collecting \$12 that James owed Millard himself, but could not secure Brown’s money even though Millard “tried my best to collect it for you.” However, Millard reported that James promised that “he will pay [Brown] the first time he comes up.”<sup>522</sup> In 1866, David Brown and other black miners formed the Colored American Joint

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<sup>520</sup> Receipt for “Cayotoville, December 1<sup>st</sup> 1855”; Charles Thomas Millard agreement with David Brown, February 23, 1857, both documents in Edwin Grabhorn Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>521</sup> David Brown’s bar bill, “Mr. Wm. Wilkerson In a/c with David Brown,” December, 1856-January 1857, Edwin Grabhorn Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>522</sup> C. Millard to Mr. David Brown, letter dated Downieville, June 28, 1855, Edwin Grabhorn Collection, University of California, Berkeley.



Stock Quartz Mining Company, which Brown served as secretary. Eventually David Brown bought a house in Downieville, where he owned some city water rights.<sup>523</sup>

Back in Ohio, Rachel continued with her life, which was being changed profoundly by David's absence. Rachel Brown's letters to David show a woman who was immersed in the concerns of daily life. However, she was not ignorant of or isolated from the issues facing African Americans in Ohio and across the country. In April 1853, she disclosed an interest in the issue of Canadian emigration, writing to David, "they was going to hold a convention a[t] Cleveland to take In consideration of Emagr[ati]on." A month later, she informed him "I have not subscribe for the paper yet but I will & send It to you. I would like to visit Canada with you to see It & to Cleaveland to[o] when you returned."<sup>524</sup>

Rachel's letters to David reveal a deep anxiety and apprehension about the future in Ohio. One of her letters suggests that when gold fever struck her husband and he decided to head out for California, the lure of riches may not have been the only factor motivating him. She persistently expressed the desire to leave the area, writing, "I don't like this place to think of buying here nor I don't think that you will likt It any more. I would like to go some place where you Could do well. you know that you can do nothing In this place."<sup>525</sup> She implored her husband to "come home so we can get a place for house keeping. I don't want to stay here unless you do. You know penlty well all about the Buisness of this place."<sup>526</sup> Rachel, however, did not emigrate to Canada or anywhere else, but remained in Ohio, living within racial boundaries that were rigidly drawn and occasionally reinforced by violence.

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<sup>523</sup> See "Notice" Colored American Joint Stock Quartz Mining Company, February 26, 1866, Edwin Grabhorn Collection, University of California, Berkeley. Also see Lambertson, "David Brown Exhibit Notes."

<sup>524</sup> For Rachel Brown quotes, see "The Brown Letters," letter dated April 1853[?]; Mrs Rachel A Brown to Mr David Brown, letter dated, Lancaster, Ohio, May 22, 1853.

<sup>525</sup> "The Brown Letters," Mrs. Rachel A. Brown to Mr. David Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 22, 1853.

<sup>526</sup> "The Brown Letters," Rachel A Brown to Mr. Dvid Brown, May 26, 1853.

While David was busy building a new life in California, Rachel was forced to shoulder the responsibilities of maintaining a household and providing for her family. She often relied on the income her mother earned as a laundress to make ends meet. In a January 1853 letter to David in California, Rachel admitted that, with her mother being ill most of the winter, “I had a hard time of It then. [H]er to waite on & all the work to do & all the Burtchen to do myself . . . I had a dull Christmass I working all day & New years day the same. It appears to me that I work harder now then ever[.]”<sup>527</sup>

Rachel’s letters to David expressed a range of concerns. The letters were steeped in the routine of daily life in Lancaster, which she never failed to chronicle affectionately for her husband in far-away California: “I told you all the knewes in my other letters” and “I wrote you a few days go all the particular newes.” She updated him on the weather, the progress of the family vegetable garden, her spring-cleaning efforts, church activities, and even the state of her teeth—which, she wrote, were “very bad & are decaying. [T]hey have began to decay on the other side. I thought of getting then plugged but It Is a \$1.00 for one now.”<sup>528</sup> In her last known letter, Rachel told David, “I thought that I would learn musich & strive to Improve my mind but It will cost me something to learn. I thought I would learn the gaitear first. It will cast 6\$ per quearter & the gaitear some 8 or 12. Piano Is Dearder yet but just as you say about It.”<sup>529</sup> She, in turn, was eager to learn about David’s business in California and about conditions there, reminding him, “O you never told me how yours mining turned out. I hope that you will write In your next about prohibiting the Emigration of Colored people the state that did not pass.” In

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<sup>527</sup> “The Brown Letters,” R A Brown to Mr D Brown, letter dated Lancaster Ohio Janueary 3, 1853.

<sup>528</sup> “The Brown Letters,” Rachel A Brown to Mr Dvid Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 26, 1853; R A Brown to Mr D Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, Janueary 3, 1853; Mrs Rachel A Brown to Mr David Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 22, 1853.

<sup>529</sup> “The Brown Letters,” To Mr David Brown, Rachel A Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, Oct 14<sup>th</sup>, 1853.

another letter she requested, “I want you to tell me what you have made & what your prospects are & you think that Country would suit me I win so too.”<sup>530</sup>

These remarkable letters reveal the economic and emotional toll the overland journey exacted from those left behind. Rachel constantly worried about the family’s precarious financial situation in Ohio and her correspondence included frequent references to the high cost of living. She wrote in January, 1853, “Every thing Is so Dearder then it has ever been before. [F]louer is \$400 a barrel poark 9 cts Beef 6 &7 Butter 15 Eggs 15 Appels 44 Candles 15 [W]ages Is no more then when you left so you see how hard I have to work to get any thing to Eat or wear Wood \$200 a Cord I have saw & split the most of It until Woodruff Came home [W]e could not afford to hire It done [M]y hoges Cost me a great deal to fatten them & to get them Bucherd.”<sup>531</sup> She pleaded, “I wish that you Could send some money soon to me.”<sup>532</sup>

Rachel’s correspondence with her husband indicates that David responded to her dire economic situation by sending her money and gifts, including a ring that “raised a great talke they Envy It much It most kills them for you to send me any thing,” she added.<sup>533</sup> However, the haphazard transportation and communication systems of the day caused agonizing delays, and mail sometimes simply disappeared. In March 1853, Rachel acknowledged, “I recived you letter with the Check & was pleased with It. It rendered me great satisfaction.” She speculated about the delay in getting David’s correspondence and concluded, “I know the reason why I don’t recived your letters more regular [T]hey have been so many accidents by steamers latey none of

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<sup>530</sup> “The Brown Letters,” Rachel A Brown to Mr Dvid Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 26, 1853; Mrs Rachel A Brown to Mr David Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 22, 1853.

<sup>531</sup> “The Brown Letters,” R A Brown to Mr D Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, Janueary 3, 1853.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

<sup>533</sup> “The Brown Letters,” To Mr David Brown from Rachel A Brown, letter dated October 14, 1853.

them get there letters any sooner.”<sup>534</sup> In another letter, she noted, “I expect that some of my letters to you was lost as I have not here form them yet.”<sup>535</sup>

In one of many tender moments captured by this rare correspondence, Rachel assured her husband that his efforts to provide for her were appreciated, noting, “my Dear you are excuseabl for not leaveing me any money as I know that you Done the best you could as I know you always do the best you can for me & I belived that you always will.”<sup>536</sup> Her love for David is palpable in every letter and reflected in the opening salutations of “My Dear Husband” and “My Dear & very affectionate husband” and her closing endearments, “I remain you[r] wife until Death.”<sup>537</sup>

Rachel assured her husband that although his letters to her were slow in arriving and her economic situation was tenuous, “you must not think that I have lost confidence In you by no menes I have not I think that we ought to live affectionate to gether as they are but us two.”<sup>538</sup>

Insisting that she was up to the task of running the household in his absence, Rachel urged David not to “weary yourself about me as I am getting more us[ed] to being a lone I don’t think It so hard as I did at first.”<sup>539</sup> However, the long separation from her husband appears to have overwhelmed her, as she confided, “I am very lonely without your company I would much rather be writing to you then sleeping to night so you m[a]y judge that I have not forgotten you by no means.” In another she admitted, “I know that you can not content yourself to sleep alone for I know I can not.” Rachel declared, “I know thayt If I should see you come home I don’t think I would consent fore you to go again without taken me along.”<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>534</sup> “The Brown Letters,” Rachel A Brown to Mr Dvid Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 26, 1853.

<sup>535</sup> “The Brown Letters,” Mrs Rachel A Brown to Mr David Brown, letter dated Lancaster , Ohio, May 22, 1853.

<sup>536</sup> “The Brown Letters,” Rachel A Brown to Mr David Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 26, 1853.

<sup>537</sup> “The Brown Letters,” January 3, 1853 and May 26, 1853.

<sup>538</sup> “The Brown Letters,” Rachel A Brown to Mr Dvid Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 26, 1853.

<sup>539</sup> “The Brown Letters,” Mrs Rachel A Brown to Mr David Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 22, 1853.

<sup>540</sup> “The Brown Letters,” R A Brown to Mr D Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, Janueary 3, 1853; Rachel A Brown to Mr Dvid Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 26, 1853.

In fact, however, Rachel Brown steadfastly refused to make the journey west. A year after David's arrival in California she wrote, "I hope that you will be able to come home this fall as I have no desire to [go] there to live."<sup>541</sup> She persistently implored her husband to "write and tell me what time you will be at home," hoping his return "will not be long[.]" In a letter dated October 14, 1853, she demanded, "as soon as you make two thousand you must come home."<sup>542</sup> Rachel could not be persuaded to make the trek to California to join her husband. She worried that the trip would be too expensive and acknowledged that "mother Is not willing for me to go." However, she admitted that the primary reason for remaining in Ohio was that she "would be afraid to Cross the waters."<sup>543</sup> David Brown did not return to Ohio; instead he chose to stay in Downieville, where he worked as a miner and as a laborer in town. He became active in the fight for African American rights in California. His new life in the West and its potential for greater economic and social freedom undoubtedly contributed to his decision to remain. California held much more potential for African Americans than did Ohio.

By 1892, Brown's health was failing. He deeded his Downieville house to friends who promised to see to it that he received a "decent burial through the Methodist Church." He was taken to the local hospital but left shortly after being admitted. Later, he was moved to the Insane Asylum in Napa, California, where he died shortly after his admittance in 1892. He was 80 years old. John Mark Lambertson notes that, although one of the inheritors of his property apparently

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<sup>541</sup> "The Brown Letters," letter dated April 1853[?]. The question mark appears on the transcribed typescript copy of the letter sent to the author from John Mark Lambertson, National Frontier Trails Museum, indicating that the date is illegible on the original document.

<sup>542</sup> "The Brown Letters," R A Brown to Mr D Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, Janueary 3, 1853; Rachel A Brown to Mr Dvid Brown, letter dated Lancaster, Ohio, May 26, 1853; To Mr. David Brown, from Rachel A Brown, letter dated October 14, 1853.

<sup>543</sup> "The Brown Letters," Rachel Brown to David Brown, letter dated April 1853[?].

sent \$20 dollars to the hospital to pay for burial expenses, David Brown was laid to rest in an unmarked grave in the hospital's "potters field."<sup>544</sup>

At the time of his death, David had been separated from Rachel for nearly 40 years. She had long since ended their marriage and gone on to create a new life for herself. In May 1858, after six years of living apart from her husband, Rachel petitioned for and received a divorce from David, citing desertion. She resumed using her maiden name, Johnson, after the divorce was granted. Rachel remarried twice more. Her mother, Sara Smith (the putative reason Rachel could not go west) lived to be 100 years old. After 1884, Rachel and her last husband, an African Methodist Episcopal preacher named Silas Smith, disappear from the historic records.<sup>545</sup>

Rachel Brown herself never traveled on the overland trail, but overland emigration affected every aspect of her life. When David crossed the plains to make a new life for himself in the West, his actions opened up new options for her even though she chose not to follow him. Rachel and David's stories reflect an important theme in the story of African American overland emigration. That is, black emigration was both a signal of change and a catalyst for it. African American western emigrants' fight against black laws and discriminatory treatment represented the opening rounds of a battle for change that would continue long after the last wagons had rolled across the plains.

The African American overlanders profiled in this chapter and throughout this report tried to make a place for themselves in the West. While no "representative" black overland emigrant experience exists, their stories share many common threads. As participants in the tumultuous era of overland emigration, African Americans took with them some of the same

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<sup>544</sup> Lambertson, "David Brown Exhibition Notes."

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

hopes and fears that would naturally attend such a journey. However, black people took to the trails, pursued their goals, and confronted the obstacles that blocked their progress in ways that were creative and unique to their personal situations. The black men and women who traversed sweet freedom's plains did so with an abiding conviction that no matter how far the trail might lead them, the West offered a better chance for personal freedom, respect, and economic success. Their stories show that they were ready, willing, and able to seize the opportunity.

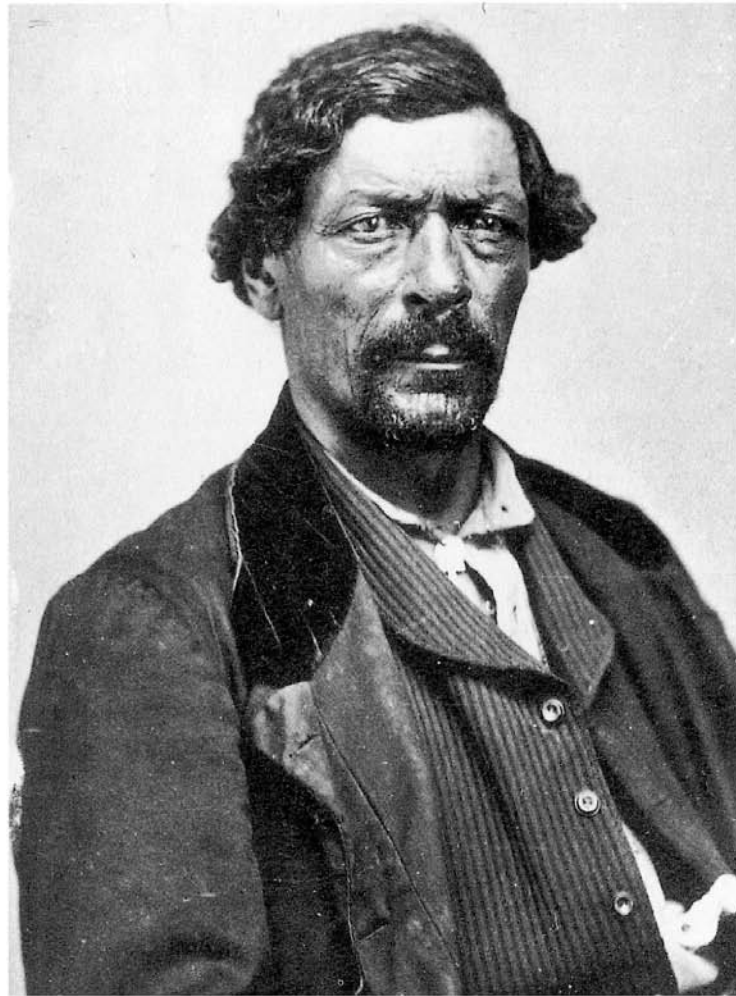
# Appendix



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Chapter 3  
Map 2



Chapter 3  
Photo 1  
James P. Beckwourth  
Source: Public Domain



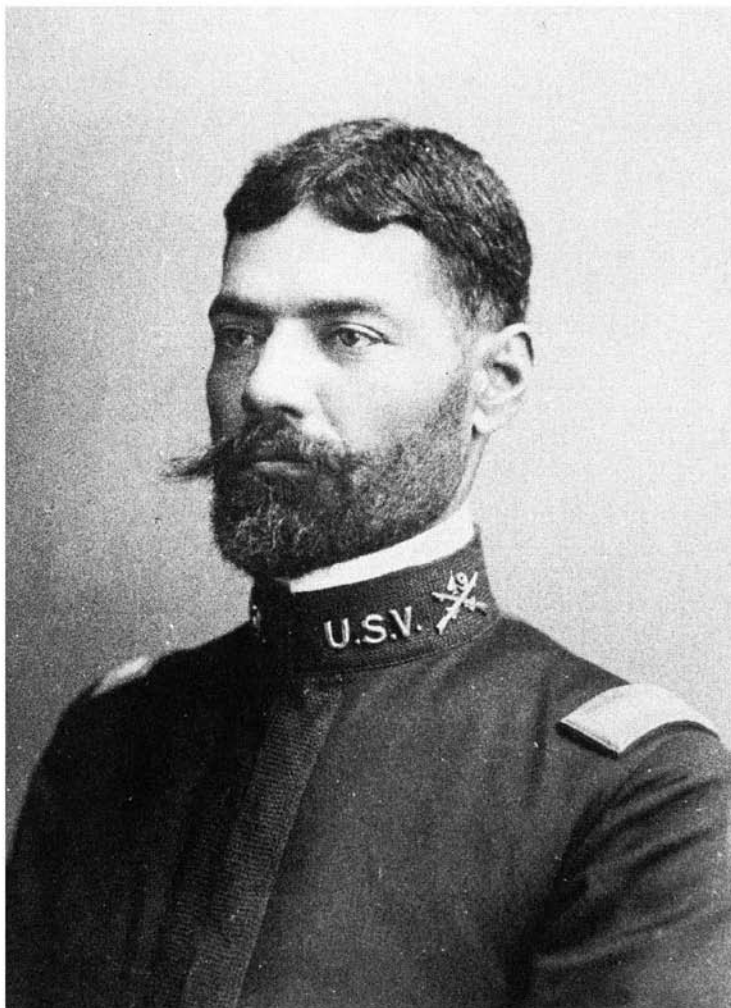
Chapter 3

Photo 2

Moses "Black" Harris, ca. 1837

Painting by Alfred Jacob Miller

Source: Library of Congress



Chapter 3

Photo 5

Edward Lee Baker, Jr.

Source: Public Domain

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