

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Black Studies Faculty Publications and
Presentations

Black Studies

Summer 2013

A Hidden History: The Stories and Struggles of Oregon's African American Communities

Walidah Imarisha

Portland State University, walidah@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/black_studies_fac



Part of the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Imarisha, Walidah, (2013). A Hidden History: The Stories and Struggles of Oregon's African American Communities," Oregon Humanities Magazine.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Black Studies Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.



A HIDDEN HISTORY

A Conversation Project program reveals the stories and struggles of Oregon's African American communities.

By Walidah Imarisha

I EYED THE THIRTY CHAIRS SET UP IN SMALL circles around the top-floor room of North Portland Library and frowned. That Sunday in February 2012, I would be leading my Conversation Project program “Why Aren’t There More Black People in Oregon? A Hidden History” for only the second time. The first was at Hollywood Library, where we reached the forty-person room capacity and had to turn folks away. So I figured we’d need a few more chairs at North Portland.

But as people poured into the large, open room, librarian Patricia Welch and I realized there wouldn’t be enough seats for all these folks even if we grabbed every chair in the library. Finally, with the room at maximum capacity, Welch regretfully started turning people away.

That was a year and a half ago, and since then I’ve facilitated the program with more than a thousand Oregonians across the state. I developed my program and a timeline, excerpted on the pages that follow, to explore the history and living legacy of race, identity, and power in this state and this nation.

Race is not a topic we often discuss in public settings, at least not explicitly. We are told we are in a “postracial” landscape, yet race is the number one determinant of access to health care, home ownership, graduation rates, and income, as the data from the Urban League of Portland (page 19) show.

We can’t understand these disparities without understanding history. I didn’t grow up in Oregon; I moved here to attend high school. It wasn’t until I had the privilege of attending a presentation by Darrell Millner, founder of Portland State University’s Black Studies Department, that I learned Oregon was created as a white utopian homeland. That Oregon was the only state that entered the Union with a clause in its constitution forbidding Black people to live here. That the punishment originally

meted out for violating this exclusionary law was the “Lash Law”: public whipping every six months until the Black person left the state. That this ideology shaped Oregon’s entire history and was reflected in the larger history of this nation.

My goal with this program and timeline is not just to recount all the horrific wrongs done to Black people and other people of color; it is to showcase communities of color as active agents in their destinies. The only reason a Black community exists in Oregon is because of determination, creativity, and community-building.

There are so many stories: from the Black community in Salem raising money for a school in 1867 when their children were barred from attending white schools, to North Williams Avenue as a 1930s underground jazz gem, to the 2001 repeal of the state constitution’s exclusionary language that was led by community leaders and organizers and supported by allies. This is a history not of victimization, but of strength and hope. One of my greatest joys has been creating a public space for people who have lived in this community all their lives to tell their stories, to be seen as the experts and change makers they are.

I always end the program with a list of organizations working across this state for racial justice, a list that grows with every program I do. Each of us has the power to learn these hidden histories, and each of us has the right and the responsibility to create the kind of state, nation, and world we all want to live in.

Walidah Imarisha is a writer, organizer, and spoken word artist who has taught at Portland State University, Oregon State University, and Southern New Hampshire University. She leads two Conversation Project programs for Oregon Humanities: “Beyond Bars: Reenvisioning the Prison System” and “Why Aren’t There More Black People in Oregon? A Hidden History.”

▼ **York, William Clark's slave**, is part of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the first American expedition to the Pacific Northwest. Native nations treat York with respect, and he "played a key role in diplomatic relations." Upon returning east, Clark describes York as "insolent and sulky" in a letter to his brother, whips and jails him, and threatens to sell him. York's fate is unknown; some historians believe he escaped slavery and lived with the Crow in Wyoming.



MICHAEL HAYNES MHAYNESART.COM

2301

Abstract of votes polled at the special election November 9th 1857, in Polk County, O.S.

Whole number of votes cast 226

Name of Precinct	Constitution		Slavery		Free Negroes	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Dallas	139	51	53	119	14	153
Boysfoot	28	7	14	20	3	22
Sweetheart	26	12	38	39	3	57
Sam	26	8	7	27	2	30
Wanameth	84	12	26	70	7	79
Eda	42	7	7	42	3	51
Belial	30	31	27	23	7	67
Salt Lake	19	3	8	13	-	26
Jackson	38	20	7	33	12	42
Wingard	24	27	25	48	2	63
Total	528	158	331	484	57	584

Secretary of Oregon
 November 23rd 1857
 I, Susan Heath, Auditor within and for said County, do hereby certify the above is a true copy of the Abstract of the votes polled at said election in said County as remains on file in my office.
 Given under my hand and official seal at Dallas O, this 19th day of November 1857.
 Susan Heath, Auditor

OREGON SECRETARY OF STATE

◀ **Oregon becomes the only state** admitted to the union with an exclusion law written into its state constitution. It bans any "free negro, mulatto, not residing in this State at the time" from living, holding real estate, and making any contracts within the state. The 1860 census shows 124 Black people living in the state. The law is repealed in 1926. The language however is not removed from the constitution until 2001. As historian Egbert Oliver writes in *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, "African Americans were essentially illegal aliens in Oregon."

▶ Abstract of votes in Polk County from the 1857 referendum on the Oregon Constitution and the prohibition of slavery and "free negroes."

1804-1806

1844

1859

1867



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

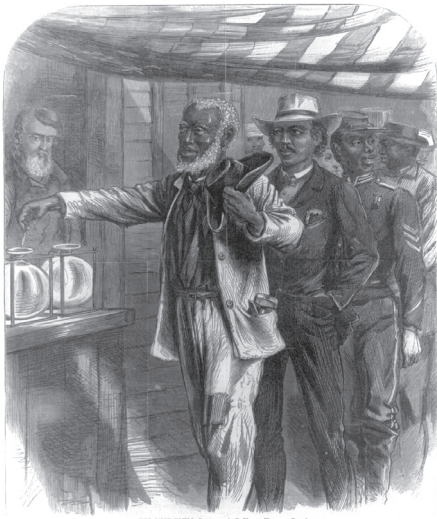
▲ **The Provisional Government** of Oregon enacts the region's first exclusion law against Blacks. This law included the infamous "Lash Law," which required that Black people—whether free or enslaved—be whipped twice a year "until he or she shall quit the territory." This penalty is later changed to forced labor. Jacob Vanderpool, a Black saloonkeeper living in Salem, is the only person known to be expelled from the state.

▼ **When William Brown's** children are refused access to public school because they are Black, Salem's Black community raises \$427.50 to operate a school for six months. After Brown files a lawsuit, the school district agrees to fund the school, opening Little Central School to serve the district's sixteen Black school-age children. Portland Public Schools also institutionalizes segregation in 1867.



OREGON STATE LIBRARY

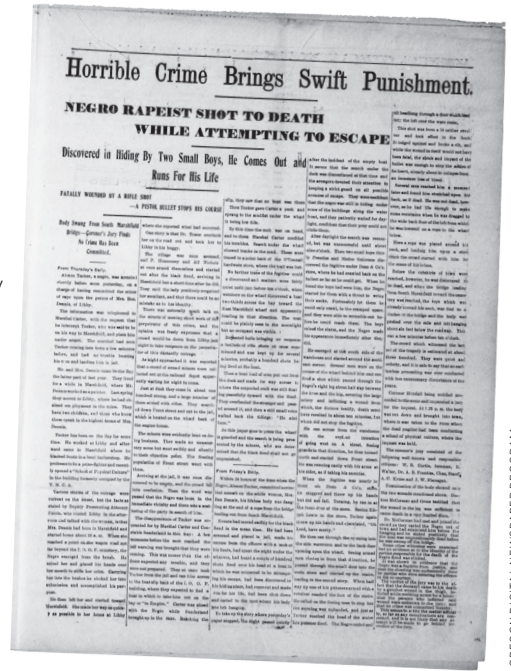
“THE FIRST VOTE.” - A. R. WAUD



“THE FIRST VOTE.”—Shaw in A. R. Waud—(See last page.)

▲ **The Fifteenth Amendment**, which outlaws voting discrimination based on race, is added to the US Constitution, despite failing to pass in both Oregon and California. This federal law supersedes a clause in the Oregon State Constitution explicitly banning Black suffrage, but the language is not removed from the constitution until 1927 and the Fifteenth Amendment is not ratified in Oregon until 1959.

▶ **Alonzo Tucker**, a Black man in Coos Bay (then called Marshfield), is charged with raping a white woman. He is released from jail and hunted by two hundred armed white men. Tucker is shot twice and then hung off a bridge. The *Coast Mail* describes the lynching mob as “quiet and orderly” and reports the lynching as follows: “No such lawless proceeding was ever conducted with less unnecessary disturbance of the peace.” Going further, the *Oregon Journal* calls Tucker a “black fiend” who got the death “he so thoroughly deserved.” No one is indicted for Tucker’s brutal murder. This is the only officially recorded lynching in Oregon, though Black community members say many more went uninvestigated.



OREGON DIGITAL NEWSPAPER PROGRAM

1870

1880s

1902

1914

OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY. #BB002122



▲ **The completion of the transcontinental railroad** brings the first large influx of Black people to Oregon. Willie Richardson, president of the Oregon Northwest Black Pioneers, credits Black railroad workers for building a community in Portland: “Because they stayed, they allowed a whole new generation to come in and succeed.” In 1906 Black businessman W. D. Allen opens the Golden West Hotel, which becomes the center of a thriving Black-owned business district. The hotel is designed primarily to serve Black railway employees, who are denied accommodations in Portland’s white-owned hotels.

THE OREGONIAN

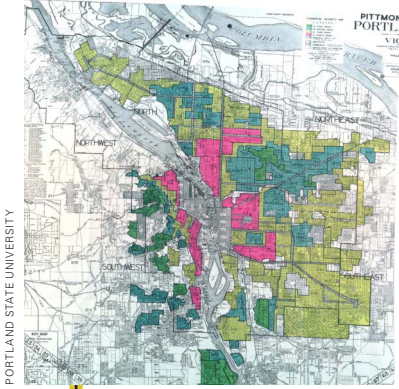


▲ **Beatrice Cannady** helps found the Portland chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. An outspoken Black civil rights activist, she is the editor and owner of *The Advocate*, Portland’s only Black newspaper. She works to repeal Oregon’s notorious “Black Laws,” which prohibit African Americans from settling in Oregon and deny voting rights to people of color.



▼ **The Portland Real Estate Board's** Code of Ethics mandates that real estate agents not sell to individuals whose race would "greatly depreciate, in the public mind, surrounding property values."

▼ 1938 Portland Residential Security Map

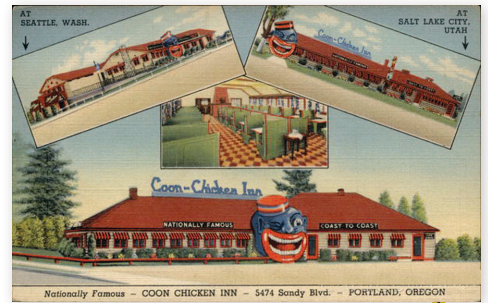


OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY, #899868



▲ **Oregon passes** the Compulsory Education Act, making it mandatory for every child to attend public school, with the goal of shutting down Catholic and other private schools. One of the act's chief supporters is Governor Walter Pierce, who is backed by the Ku Klux Klan. Its members see the law as a way to further white supremacy through assimilating and Americanizing Catholic immigrants and Oregon youth. In 1925, the Supreme Court deems the act unconstitutional before it can be enacted.

▼ **Coon Chicken Inn**, an American chain of restaurants, opens in Salt Lake City. Diners enter through a door that portrays the mouth of a smiling blackface caricature. The chain's third restaurant opens in 1930 in Portland's Hollywood District. A restaurant with a similar history, Lil Sambo's (formerly Lil Black Sambo's), still operates today in Lincoln City.



1919

1921

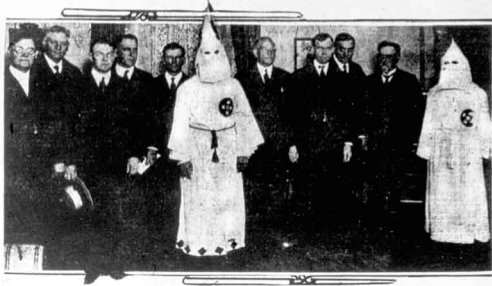
1922

1923

1925



CHIEF KLUXERS TELL LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS JUST WHAT MYSTIC ORGANIZATION PROPOSES TO DO IN CITY OF PORTLAND



PORTLAND TELEGRAM, AUGUST 2, 1921

▲ **The Ku Klux Klan** establishes its Oregon chapter. At the height of its popularity, the Klan claims that 15 percent of eligible Americans (white men) are members. Some of the individuals pictured above include the Portland police chief, a district attorney, a US attorney, a Multnomah County sheriff, and the Portland mayor. The Klan's reign in Oregon is brief, but notorious. Among other things, the organization influences the election of 1922, unseating the gubernatorial incumbent, Ben Olcott, who is an outspoken critic of the Klan.

▼ **Sixty skilled Black workers** from the South move their families to Maxville, a town run by Bower-Hicks Lumber Company in Wallowa County. In 2007, filmmaker Gwen Trice, whose family lived in Maxville until 1943 when it was dismantled, founds the Maxville Project, which later becomes the Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center, a nonprofit organization that collects and preserves the history of multicultural logging communities in the Pacific Northwest.



MAXVILLE HERITAGE ARCHIVES



THE OREGONIAN

▲ **Jazz is popular** in Portland as early as the 1930s, but flourishes after World War II because of the influx of Black people drawn by wartime industries. North Williams Avenue becomes the heart of the Portland jazz scene and the heart of the Black community. In a city considered one of the most discriminatory north of the Mason-Dixon line, clubs line Williams, offering jazz twenty-four hours a day, every day of the week.



OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY, #ORH126043

▲ **Voters approve** construction of Memorial Coliseum in the Eliot neighborhood, resulting in the teardown of more than 450 Albina homes and businesses. At the time, four out of five people in this thriving, close-knit community are Black. Many are former inhabitants of Vanport because redlining policies limited where they could live. This same year, federal officials also approve highway construction funds that would pave Interstates 5 and 99 through South Albina, destroying more than eleven hundred homes.

▼ **A political rally** releases the frustrations of Black youth in Portland's Albina neighborhood and the streets explode in an urban uprising, sparked by discontentment with treatment by the police. Between two and three hundred people throw bottles and rocks at cars, while a few hurl firebombs through store windows, causing \$20,000 in damage at one grocery store and damaging dozens of others. On the first day of the Albina riot, Detroit, Michigan, also experiences devastating race riots that claim forty-one lives and cause damage estimated at more than \$500 million. Another riot in the same Portland neighborhood happens in 1969.

1930s

1943

1948

1956

1967



© THOMAS ROBINSON

▲ **Vanport City** is hastily constructed between Portland and the Columbia River to house wartime Kaiser Shipyards workers. Southern Blacks are recruited in large numbers to work in the shipyards. At its peak, the city houses one hundred thousand people, 40 percent of whom are Black. It becomes Oregon's second-largest city, containing the largest US public housing project.



© THOMAS ROBINSON



THE OREGONIAN

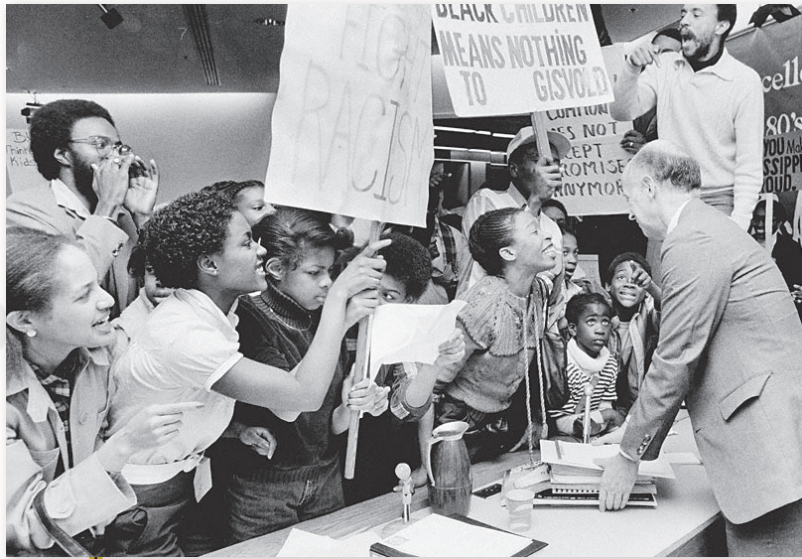
◀ **The Columbia River** floods and the dike protecting Vanport breaks. Because Vanport was built on reclaimed lowlands along the Columbia River, the city was vulnerable to flooding. In addition, it was built quickly with temporary housing. During the flood, fifteen people are killed, the entire city is underwater, and nearly eighteen thousand people, many of them Black, are left homeless.

▼ **Kent Ford and others** establish the Portland chapter of the Black Panther Party, with support from Reed College students. The Panthers run a free children's breakfast program for five years, feeding up to 125 children a day. They operate the Fred Hampton Memorial People's Health Clinic, which grows to twenty-seven doctors and becomes one of the longest-running Panther health clinics in the country. In 1970, they founded the Panther Dental Clinic. Portland Panthers experience the same targeting by law enforcement as Panthers nationally, and members of the Portland Panthers face multiple false arrests and trials.



◀ Cover of Willamette Bridge, January 14, 1970.

REED COLLEGE



THE OREGONIAN

▲ **The Black United Front** protests the closure of predominantly Black Harriet Tubman Middle School by organizing a one-day boycott with four thousand students. The closure follows Portland schools' mandatory busing program throughout the 1960s and '70s that sent Black students to schools far from their homes to attend integrated schools; most white students attended their closest neighborhood school.

1969

1970

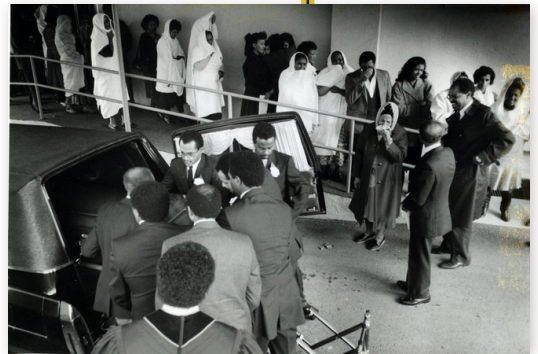
1982

1988

▼ **The Black community** protests the expansion of Emanuel Hospital, funded by federal money earmarked for urban renewal. The expansion demolishes nearly three hundred homes in North Portland. Residents are given ninety days to move. Homeowners are compensated with a maximum \$15,000 payment, and renters receive \$4,000. The federal construction funds run out after the homes are demolished but before construction is finished. The expansion takes decades to complete.



THE OREGONIAN



THE OREGONIAN

▲ **Mulugeta Seraw**, an Ethiopian student and father, is killed in Portland by three skinheads affiliated with the White Aryan Resistance. He is beaten with a bat and left in a puddle of his own blood. Tom Metzger, leader of WAR, calls the killing a "civic duty." The community organizes rallies and educational events, and starts organizations in the wake of this attack. In 1990, a fifteen-hundred-person rally in memory of Seraw takes place along the South Park Blocks.

▼ **The name of Union Avenue**, the main street through the heart of the historic Black community, is changed to Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. A coalition opposing the name change gets enough signatures (6 percent of Oregon's population) to put the name change on the ballot. The Oregon Supreme Court blocks the initiative challenge by ruling the name change is an administrative decision and therefore not subject to voting by citizens.



TRACIE HALL (FLICKR: TRACIE7779)

1989

1990s

1994

1996

▼ **In response to** complaints of neighborhood activists and the recommendations of a citywide task force report on abandoned housing, the City of Portland begins revitalizing the Albina neighborhood, using building code enforcement to confront the extreme level of housing abandonment. Whites buy homes, displacing many low-income Black families to relatively far-flung areas where they can afford the rents. By 1999, Blacks own 36 percent fewer homes in the neighborhood than a decade prior, while whites own 43 percent more.



MICHAEL GALPERT



ISTOCKPHOTO

▲ **Measure 11** passes, which establishes mandatory minimum sentencing for several crimes. It removes judges' discretion in sentencing. The measure requires juveniles over the age of fifteen who are charged with these crimes to be tried as adults. As much as 41 percent of Oregon's prison population growth is attributable to Measure 11. A 2011 report by the Partnership for Safety and Justice says Black people account for just 4 percent of the state's youth population, but they represent 19 percent of Measure 11 indictments.



PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

▲ **Activist, community organizer**, and former politician Avel Louise Gordly becomes the first Black woman to be elected to the Oregon State Senate. Her legislative record eventually includes initiatives that focus on cultural competency in education, mental health, and criminal justice. She also achieves notable reform in the state senate caucus system and briefly secures press access for meetings that are usually closed.

STATE OF BLACK OREGON

2009 STATISTICS

From the Urban League of Portland

► HOUSING/INCOME

Median income Black-headed households: \$30,000
Median income White-headed households: \$46,800

Percentage of Black adults with no checking account: 20%
Percentage of White adults with no checking account: 7%

38% of Black children live in households with income below the poverty line



White households who own their home: 68%

Black households who own their home: 37%



Black students who meet or exceed the 10th grade reading benchmark: 38%



White students who meet or exceed the 10th grade reading benchmark: 68%

◀ EDUCATION

Black students are twice as likely to be suspended or expelled as White students

Black students dropout rates are twice that of White students

Black students who graduate on time: 68%
White students who graduate on time: 85%



▲ CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Black incarceration rates are 6 times that of whites.



◀ HEALTH

Black babies are 50% more likely to be born with low birth weight

Black babies are 50% more likely to suffer infant mortality