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HIDDEN CITIZENS: BLACKS IN SALEM THROUGH THE YEARS

By Virginia Green

Although victims of white racial prejudice and racially restrictive laws, African Americans in Salem's history have developed their own lives and created their own opportunities in the community.

However, because they were so few and because most of them lived here only temporarily, there are few written records of their presence and their contributions to life here. This article outlines some African Americans who lived in Salem, what little we know of their lives, and the restrictions they faced because of their race. It is hoped that this article will stimulate others to research further the lives of these and other hidden citizens.

By 1844 Oregon had declared both slavery and the residence of African Americans within the territory to be illegal. In an 1857 vote on a proposed state constitution, Marion County citizens spoke out on the subject of slavery: 1044 voted against; 214 in favor. On the subject of free Negroes within the county, the vote was 1115 against their residence here, 76 in favor.

These exclusionary laws were eventually overturned in the 1920s, but it was not until the civil rights movement after World War II that African Americans were accorded full rights, including public accommodation.

However difficult their lives were here in the early years, the writings of Obed Dickinson provide evidence of the special challenges the black pioneers faced. As a Congregational minister in the 1860s, Dickinson found some of his church's white members strongly opposed to his actions when he conducted the wedding of an African American couple and encouraged the attendance of blacks at his church. Dickinson's wife Charlotte taught black women in her kitchen because they had been denied an education.

Was Polly Holmes one of these women, perhaps the one Dickinson referred to as "having a family of her own?"

A class picture from Salem High School in the 1920s included only two black students. – M.C.H.S. Photo 83.1.1.17

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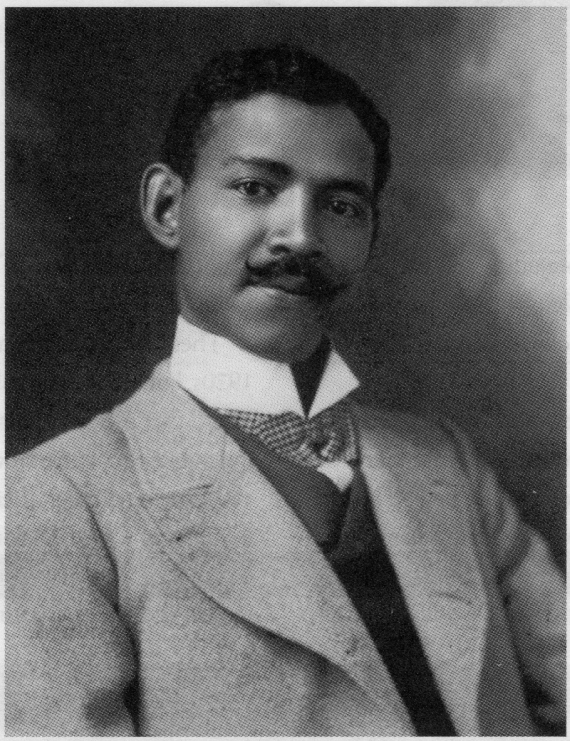
Robin and Polly Holmes had come to Oregon in 1844 with their owner, Nathaniel Ford, who had promised them their freedom. They settled on his land claim near the present city of Rickreall, in Polk County where they were allowed to grow fruit and vegetables of their own, and to sell their produce to immigrants. But they remained slaves until 1850. In that year Ford's son, Marcus, and Robin had gone to California in search of gold. Marcus drowned on the way home, but Robin returned with about $900 in gold dust, earning freedom for himself, his wife, and newborn son.

In 1852 Robin and Polly moved to Salem to establish a nursery, but without their three older children who were retained by Ford as his wards until they came of age. Realizing that Ford would not release the children, Robin instituted *habeas corpus* proceedings for their freedom. A court decision in 1853 ruled that the children were in Oregon where slavery did not exist and so were free. Roxanna and James Holmes joined their parents in Salem, but Mary Jane remained with the Fords as a member of their household.



In 1902 Cronise portrait of William G. Johnson as depicted in "The Art Perfected." – Courtesy Oregon Historical Society, Cronise #2-31

In 1857, the year of the Dred Scott case which allowed slavery in the territories, Mary Jane married. Ford again claimed Mary Jane as his property, compelling the groom, Reuben Shipley, to pay $700 for his bride's freedom, a task that took many years to accomplish. Ten years later, in 1867, Mary Jane's widowed mother Polly was committed to the state insane asylum at Portland. Mary Jane, then the widow of R. G. Drake, moved to Salem with her two younger Shipley children prior to 1880.[1]

Rachel Belden, though not one of Charlotte Dickinson's students, lived in Salem through the early years of its history. In 1863 Rachel, a former slave who had lived with the Delaney family in the Waldo Hills area since 1843, married a widower, Nathan Brooks. Eventually they moved to Salem where they raised their two sons, Samuel and Mansfield, and her son Jackson. An older son Noah lived and worked with the Stanley family in East Salem. When Daniel Delaney Sr. was murdered, Rachel's son Jackson was a witness and identified the murderers.

After her husband's death in 1874, Rachel bought a house at Miller and Fir Streets. The 1877 tax files show that she also owned 144 homestead acres on the west side of the Willamette River near the bend in the river across from Keizer. "Aunt Rachel Brooks" was a familiar figure in Salem and well remembered after her death in 1910. Her unmarked grave, reportedly next to that of her son Noah, is in the Delaney plot at Pioneer Cemetery.

Rachel lived in Salem for thirty years. And she was not alone: black women cared for their own families and were housekeepers in white homes; men worked as laborers or ran small businesses. Among these entrepreneurs was George Winslow who in 1844 operated a brickyard in North Salem.[2] A decade later Robin Holmes ran his nursery. Another decade passed before there is a record of another black-owned enterprise: Albert Bales' blacksmith shop. He is the only "colored" person listed in the 1867 Salem City Directory, living at "the north end of High Street." However, there were probably many African American families not listed. They organized in 1868 an evening school and placed an announcement in the local newspaper: "Notice is hereby given that the colored people of Salem expect to pay all the expenses of the Evening School now being held by them, without aid from other citizens – no person is authorized to collect funds in our name."

Three years after the school was established, the 1871 Salem City Directory lists ten "colored" citizens: Bales, A., blacksmith on Front Street, residence between Front and Water Streets; Bretten, J., barber, boards with Johnson; Dewitt, T., barber, boards with Johnson; DeSouzer, barber, boards with Mrs. Van Pelt (a "colored" widow); Gorman, H., laborer, corner of High and Court Streets; Jones, D., barber, business on State, between Commercial and Liberty, residence corner of Marion and Winter; Johnson, W. P., painter, residence NW corner Marion and Church; Smith, J., cook, residence corner of Commercial and Chemeketa; Williams, Jesse, laborer, residence on Union, between Summer and Capitol.

Albert Bales, or Albert Bayless as he was later known, had been born in slavery in Tennessee on August 15, 1819. He escaped a cruel master at about age 30 and fled to California, later moving to Salem. He married Mary Ann Randall in Salem on October 18, 1866. She had been given her freedom in Kentucky in 1839, and moved as a widow with two small children to Oregon in 1864. He was an active member of the Methodist Church. In the Bayless' later years, when he was blind and help-

less, friends would celebrate his birthday by substantially contributing to his larder.[3]

In the 1880 census, H. Gorman is a 45-year-old laborer, married to G. A. Gorman, age 36, a housekeeper. He was born in Missouri, as were his parents. She and her parents were born in Kentucky. Where did they meet? Perhaps the birthplace of their eldest child gives us a clue: son "F.", 19, was born in Missouri. Daughter Emma, 16, and son "W.", 12, were born in Montana. In this census, the older son is a hostler; the two younger children are listed as being "at home."

But there is another record which places the Gorman family in Oregon at an earlier date. In the *Polk County Observer* of July 7, 1888, is the obituary of Hannah Gorman, "Pioneer negress of 1844" who had died on July 2 at the home of her son Hiram. She had been the former slave of Captain Sharp (Thorp). Hiram did not long survive his mother. Three weeks later, the same newspaper reported "Hiram Gorman, a Negro and well-known character of Salem, died last Monday morning of quick consumption."[4] Although he is buried in Pioneer Cemetery, the location of his grave is now unknown. The probate record of Hiram's wife, Georgia Ann, shows that she was deceased by October 10, 1891. Her children are named as Frank, Emma and William.

Friend of Louise Cronise, Nanelle B. Bloom had her portrait made in 1911.
– Courtesy Oregon Historical Society, Cronise #77-33

Some thirteen years earlier, Mrs. Gorman had been instrumental in the rescuing of a 6-week-old white baby abandoned by his mother. Deserted at dawn on August 10, 1878, the child was found on the doorstep of the Rafter family near the river. When Mrs. Gorman learned of the foundling, she sent her husband to collect the little one and to buy baby things so that she could care for the infant until he was strong enough to be sent to the Glen Oaks Orphanage in town. The reporter commented, "... when the story of the foundling is told him he will bless Mrs. Gorman and the good ladies of Salem who cared for him when he was a helpless little waif throw[n] upon their charities."[5]

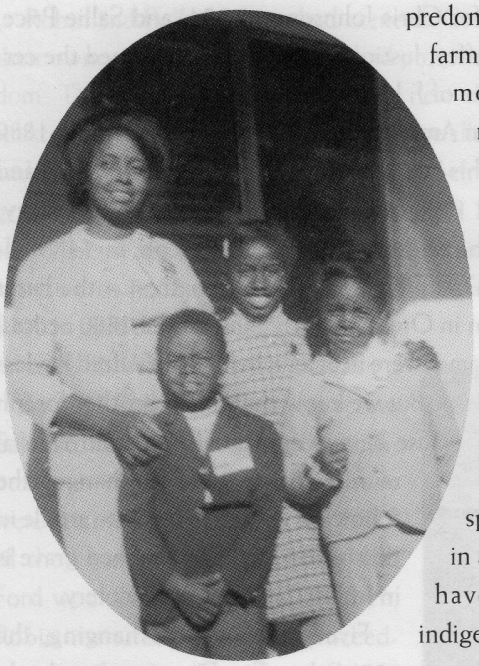
The 1880 census listed two other black citizens in Salem: George Reynolds, 30, a teamster carriage driver, born in Missouri; and Ann Titab, 50, cook, born in Tennessee. George Reynolds' name appeared in marriage records of the same year: he was a witness for Chris Johnson, over 21, and Sallie Price, over 18. James Coffey, Justice of the Peace, performed the ceremony at the home of J. Henry Brown, also a witness.

Another African American family living near Salem in 1880 was the Drakes. This family had arrived in Oregon by 1865 and appear also in the 1870 census: Alfred, 44, born in Kentucky; his wife, Elizabeth, 33, born in Missouri; Joseph T., 14; William, 11; George D., 5; James, 3; and Elizabeth, 1 – the latter three all were born in Oregon. By the time of the 1880 census, only George and James were in Salem, living with Alfred Bayless and listed as nephews. But we know their older brother Joseph was still in town because he was convicted in a controversial murder trial in 1884 and hanged the following year. (See separate article in this issue.) Drake's unmarked grave is in lot 202 of Pioneer Cemetery.

Five years after the hanging, the 1890 Salem City Directory listed only two "colored" citizens: Miss M. Cash, and T.C. King, who was employed on the Wallace farm. By 1893 at least two more African Americans, Johnny Jones and his daughter Mollie, lived in Salem. Jones worked on the steamboat *Willamette* as a waiter. Later, Jones was known to be the caterer who, if you were fortunate enough to employ, made you a success socially.[6] Jones is listed as a 47-year-old mulatto and his 16-year-old daughter as "in school" in the 1900 census, which also lists his sister Anna Smith as a widow from Ohio doing housework and day labor.

The 1900 Marion County census lists 29 citizens as black. Among these, four were in the local insane asylum: Frank Summers, a 34-year-old laborer from Pennsylvania; Joseph Thompson, a 56-year-old laborer from Idaho; James Oliver, 56, a coachman from Pennsylvania; Jennie Downing, 34, a servant from Indiana. Within the city of Salem were listed several other blacks: George Randles, a blacksmith, and his wife Maggie, 53 and 55, from Missouri and Illinois; Charles Livingston, 22-year-old laborer, born in Oregon; and Mrs. George Giles, widow, aged 65, from Pennsylvania, doing housework and day labor. The rest lived in rural locations in the county.

Robert Marsh, a local historian who has long researched Salem history, notes that the black population did not follow the



Claudia Thompson, her children Bruce and Bob, and niece Brenda Sampson in 1969.
– Courtesy Claudia Thompson

predominant occupation, farming. They were a mobile group, mostly single men, who had trade skills or worked as laborers. They lived alone or as boarders in the town of Salem where they found employment. Those who spent their last days in an institution may have merely been indigents without family to support them as they became too old, too ill, or otherwise unable to care for themselves.

Living in or near Salem about 1900 were two blacks photographed by Thomas Cronise. William G. Johnson is included in *The Art Perfected*, a collection of Cronise's photographs, on plate 23, as a handsome, well-dressed young gentleman. Unfortunately, nothing more is known of him. On the facing page, plate 24, is the beautiful Nanelle B. Bloom. Dressed for the winter in her stylish wool coat and wide-brimmed hat, Miss Bloom is portrayed as a confident young woman of 1911, identified as a friend of Louise Cronise. The city directory of that year lists her as a student, boarding at 859 Center Street. She next appears in the 1915 directory as an assistant to Fredrick H. Thompson, a physician in room 302 of the US National Bank Building. She had rooms at 433 North High Street.

In 1915, two other African Americans, Charles Letcher and Charles Maxwell, appear in the directory. Letcher had arrived in Salem by 1905 and had worked as a porter, janitor, driver, and laborer. (See related article in this issue.)

Charles Maxwell and his wife Marie A. Maxwell resided at 622 Mill Street. He was a porter for the Oregon Electric Railway. By 1921 he had a shoeshine business at 315 State Street and lived at 590 S. 25th Street. In that year, Marie Maxwell and two daughters, Christalle and Dorothy Delores, were admitted to membership in the First Methodist Church. The next year, Charles and their other two daughters, Maxine and LaVada, also became members. One of the daughters was later married in this church.

Not everyone in Salem appreciated the Maxwells in 1922. Charles Maxwell received a letter later published in the *Capital Journal:* "We have stood you as long as we intend to stand you, and you must unload, if you don't we will come to see you."[7] It was signed KKK over a skull and crossbones.

Despite the threat, Maxwell did not leave town. In fact, his business grew to two locations on Commercial and on Liberty Streets and his home remained at the same location. In 1928 he opened the Fat Boy Barbecue in the Hollywood section and his home was at 1940 N. Capitol. The business was successful until a bank foreclosure during the Depression. In 1929, Maxine Maxwell, identified as a Salem student, was denied a room in the women's dormitory at OSU because she was black.[8] In 1930, a son, Merriman, was a porter for A. L. Tumbleson, a local barber.

The 1930s were especially hard for all workers. Although Charles Letcher and James Williams worked in Salem, a 1936 report by a local NAACP officer stated that "Salem has no Negro population, except a few inmates in the Penal Institution and Insane Hospital. All the colored people who did live here, have all moved to Los Angeles. I know of no Negro living in Salem at the present time."

The late George Strozut remembered that as a child of 7 in 1940, he and other travelers were greeted with a prominent sign as they arrived in the local Greyhound bus station, located at the north end of the old Senator Hotel. The sign listed Salem statistics (including the fact that the population was 31,000) and ended with the statement that the city was "99.9 percent white."

A former Salem resident, David Martinez, remembers other black residents from that period. Gordie T. Levy, "Jitterbug", a black man who worked for the railway on Extra Gang 23, was remembered as a familiar and beloved figure at the depot in the late 1930s and for a decade later. Others were Calvin and "Miss Hattie" Smith, owners of a shoeshine shop. Martinez's high school graduating class of 1956 included the

Salem's first black nurse Claudia Thompson, with Mrs. Pool, Mrs. Ostrander, and Mrs. Pratt of the Salem Memorial Hospital staff.
– Courtesy Claudia Thompson

Smiths' daughter, Barbara, who was "distinguished, respected and highly regarded by her classmates and teachers."

The African American population in Oregon quadrupled during World War II to participate in the war effort. During and after the war, there was an awakening of the public consciousness toward minorities in America. After serving in the military, working in defense plants, laboring even more intensely in agriculture, African Americans expected to be treated with more equality. Accommodation laws, allowing blacks to use public facilities, came into place in Oregon in the late 1950s. Earlier, one of the best known incidents of this discrimination was when Mark Hatfield had to take Paul Robeson, after a Salem performance, to Portland to find him a place to sleep. Today, many Salem African Americans can remember the difficulties of travel when motels and dining places were closed to them.

African Americans faced other challenges in Salem. Barbers would refuse to cut their hair. Only four of the 12,000 state civil servants working in Salem were black in 1962. Three of the four had bad experiences finding housing, although they eventually located it. Passage of other civil rights legislation for Oregon and Salem abolished more legal barriers. Salem formed a human rights commission, with Marguerite Wright as a prime mover along with Charles Sprague of the *Oregon Statesman* and Jim Welch of the *Capital Journal*.[9]

By the 1960s, increased opportunities attracted black families to the Salem area. Claudia Thompson remembers the beautiful springtime in 1962 when she and her husband Robert, along with her parents, the Sampsons, worked picking berries. She and Robert went back to Arizona at the end of the harvest. She left her job as a nurse's aide and they sold their home, returning to Salem in 1964—just in time to observe the devastating floods of that year. "What have we done?" she recalls them asking themselves as they watched the water rise in Salem streets. "It was scary, but we were determined to stay." While her husband worked in the fields, the Valley Migrant League and Vista students offered childcare for their children, an assistance that was vital to their family.

During the following years of discrimination and lost job opportunities, Claudia and her family persisted in taking responsibility for improving their lives. She continued her education as an LPN at Salem Technical School (Chemeketa Community College) and was hired at Memorial Hospital where she became the first black nurse in Salem. She considers their home as a haven for other African Americans who need assistance.

In the 1970s many African Americans, well educated in their home states, saw Oregon as a new opportunity for advancement in their careers. Although they comprised less than two percent of Salem's population in 2000, they constitute a significant group of leaders. Among these are the following: Raymond Byrd, a police officer honored as Keizer Officer of the Year in 1998; Geraldine Hammond, a former public school administrator for whom a new school has been named; Jim Hill, Jr., former state treasurer for two terms; Lonnie Jackson, author and director of the Oregon Youth Authority Office of Minority Affairs; Johnny Lake, a member of the Oregon Commission for Black Affairs; M. Lee Pelton, the president of Willamette University; Willie Richardson, a former Salem-Keizer School Board member and owner of Willie's Fashion Hats and More; AJ Talley, past president of the Salem NAACP; Nellie N. and Odell Thompson, the founders of the Pauline Memorial Church; S. Frank Thompson, the assistant director of the Oregon Department of Corrections; and Jackie Winters, a two-term representative in the Oregon legislature and owner of Jackie's Ribs. Many others, less well-known to the public, serve this community in the professions and as business entrepreneurs.

In 1995, six local citizens were interviewed on a CCTV program, "Legacy: Pioneers in Black Salem." The panel included Kathy Bailey, David Burgess, Willie Richardson, AJ Talley, Claudia Thompson and Jackie Winters. They related a variety of experiences living here and, from their personal insights, created an audio-visual documentary of historical importance for Salem.

Unfortunately, many of Salem's early African American families are unknown. For the researcher, their names are found in city directories, telephone books and other public records – sometimes with the distinguishing citation of "Colored" but the stories of their lives are yet to be told by local historians. As the general population of our country becomes increasingly interested in genealogy, Salem black families are conducting their own personal inquiries, hoping to tell this unique American story to their own children and to a wider audience in our community.

I want to thank Claudia Thompson for her inspiration, support and knowledge in preparing this article. Robert Marsh and Kyle Jansson also provided research.

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2 *Daily Oregon Statesman,* January 1, 1905.

3 *Daily Oregon Statesman,* April 19, 1907 and April 25, 1907.

4 *Polk County Observer,* July 27, 1888.

5 *Daily Oregon Statesman,* August 11, 1878.

6 *Capital Journal,* January 13, 1922; Mary Eyre oral interview, January 22, 1988, p. 151.

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8 Ibid.; city directories.

9 Floyd J. McKay, *An Editor for Oregon: Charles A. Sprague and the Politics of Change* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1998), p. 208-214.