

Black Americans in Southern Oregon

DONATION LAND CLAIM

The Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 had a major influence on the accumulation of wealth and property in Southern Oregon, but Black Americans, and Hawaiians, were explicitly denied access to this opportunity.

The 1862 Homestead Act technically made land available to African Americans with passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, but in practice, applicants were often denied. And while Oregon's Black Exclusion Laws were seldom enforced, they had the intended effect of discouraging Blacks from moving to Oregon.

Black Americans in Southern Oregon may not have been subject to the same "redlining" tactics that occurred in bigger cities, like Portland, but this is likely because the white residents did not see the tiny Black population as a major threat to their dominance, or property values. * This does not mean Blacks were welcome to live where they pleased. Medford and Ashland were "Sundown Towns," in practice, if not in law. This meant that any Black person seen in town after sunset could be unceremoniously, and sometimes violently, escorted out of town by police.

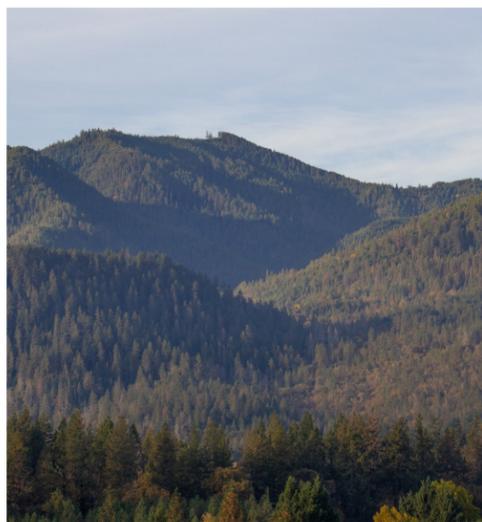
*some neighborhoods may have had racial housing covenants, but researchers are so far unaware of them, or whether they played a major role in housing patterns



Bigotry and Violence

The Ku Klux Klan was active and enmeshed in Southern Oregon's business and politics in the 1920s. The KKK of the 1920s was more focused on anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish and anti-immigrant sentiment than the first wave of the terrorist organization, which arose after the Civil War and was primarily concerned with reinforcing white supremacy in relation to Blacks. The Black population in Southern Oregon in the 1920s was very small, but the KKK still sent a powerful message: if you were not white and Protestant, you were not welcome here.

Despite the anti-Black laws and sentiments of Southern Oregon, Black people have been present and a part of this community since the earliest days of American westward settlement. Here are a few Black Oregonians who made Southern Oregon their home at a time when technically, Black people were not even allowed to set foot in the state.



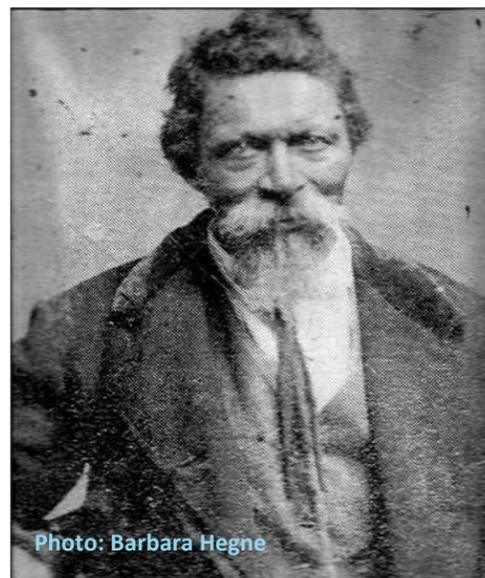
BEN JOHNSON

Ben Johnson was a blacksmith who lived in Uniontown and was listed on the tax assessment roles in 1868 and 1869. A mountain in the Applegate is named for him.



Mathews Family of Eagle Point and Jacksonville

Ellender Mathews (seated) was born an enslaved person on the Mask plantation in North Carolina. In the late 1840s, Ellender, who was in her fifties, packed up and moved with her five children to Oregon (daughter Susannah is pictured above, standing). They were not allowed to own property, but the Mathews family lived on a homestead in Eagle Point (owned by a white resident) for many decades. Ellender's son, John, joined the family out West and became a well-known community member. The John Mathews cemetery in Eagle Point is named for him.



Black Exclusion Laws: Before and After

Census records show that Black Americans came to Oregon, and Jackson County, prior to the series of exclusion laws. The numbers were always small, but the enactment of the laws barring Blacks from entering the state, as well as the actions of the KKK and an overall atmosphere of racism, caused the number of Black Americans in Jackson County to decline into the late twentieth century.

Year	Black population in Jackson County	Black population in Oregon
1850	42	204
1860	42	128
1910	41	1,492
1930	18	2,144
1950	12	11,529

