

Post-Civil War Salem

We know little of the history of the African Americans in Marion and Polk counties in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. However, records that are available shed some light on that time: they describe two celebrations and a campaign to educate the young.

Celebrating Emancipation

The anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation became a cause for joyful gatherings among African Americans around the country. Thanks to a January 3, 1868, article in the *Salem Daily Record* titled “Emancipation Jubilee” we know a few details of one such celebration attended by people from Salem, Albany, and the surrounding area.

At least three names that have become familiar to us appear in the article. Presiding over the ceremonies was “A. Bales, a blacksmith,” whom we know to be Alfred Bayless. “Wm. Johnson opened the meeting with an earnest prayer.” And “the address by Dan Jones was brief, pertinent to the day, and in good taste. He also read the Emancipation Proclamation very well, and it was listened to with great attention.” All three men were connected with Salem’s “colored school” (see p. 20): Johnson was its director, and Bayless and Jones published a notice regarding expenses for its “Evening School” (see illustration, p. 21).

The reporting on the Emancipation Jubilee and the available information on Salem’s colored school begin to compose a picture of active community leadership on the part of prominent African American citizens at that time.

The *Salem Daily Record* article also portrays a white population beginning to accept the black citizenry in its midst. The event was attended by both blacks and whites: “Many of our

Life in a Peculiar Paradise

citizens of both political parties were present, and we doubt if there was one among them all who failed to respect this effort of colored citizens to show respect for the day from which they date the freedom of their race in this nation." The article describes the African Americans gathered as "a very respectable company of colored people" and notes that "[t]he exercises were conducted entirely by themselves." It goes on to say that after the ceremony, there was "a social dance and supper, at which a few persons only [presumably white] remained to protect them from any intrusion."

The writer attempted to capture the significance and emotional power of the celebration for the black citizens (including six who had been freed by the Proclamation) who took part:

The scene at the singing of the Battle-Cry of Freedom—"Rally round the Flag, Boys,"—called out all the enthusiasm of the impulsive race. Every voice shouted it, hands were wildly waved toward the flag, which formed a principal ornament of the room, and there could not have been an unmoved heart in the audience.

Records remain of a subsequent celebration in 1870, in which George P. Riley of Portland spoke eloquently of black contributions to the nation, starting in the Revolution and continuing into the Civil War, where "negro regiments ... were loyal to our flag and true to the best principles of our Government, and still ready to die for liberty and union ..." Following the address, the participants enjoyed a "very elegant supper ... quite as bountiful and excellent as could be conveniently have been gotten up in this latitude."²⁸

Perseverance

The Colored School: Little Central

During the 1860s, all Salem households, black and white, were assessed a property tax to pay for the education of the city's children. Despite being required to pay this tax, African American families were barred from sending their children to public schools. In 1861, one man, William P. Johnson, went so far as to offer a five-hundred-dollar scholarship for his daughter-in-law to attend one of the city's schools, but his offer was rejected.²⁹

Johnson and other black Salem citizens decided to raise funds to start a school of their own. The "colored school" opened in March 1867, its students taught by Mrs. Rufus Mal-lory. An accounting of the first term's expenses appears in the September 16, 1867, *Salem Daily Record*:

THE COLORED SCHOOL. — W. P. Johnson, director of the colored school, returns the following statement of the receipts and expenditures of that school for the last six months:

Collected from citizens,	\$430.75
Disbursed —	
Incidental expenses, fit-	
ting up and warming room,	\$ 67.50
Rent of room,	60.00
Tuition,	300.00
Cash on hand,	3.25
	\$430.75

Mr. Johnson, on behalf of the colored citizens of Salem, desires to return thanks to the friends of his people for the kindness and liberality manifested.

Life in a Peculiar Paradise



Salem's public schools ca. 1893; Central School is in the middle and Little Central (the colored school) is at middle right

NOTICE is 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.

A. BALES,
D. JONES

SALEM, Jan. 21, 1868.

A notice in the *Salem Daily Record* indicating that there were evening classes at the “colored school”

Perseverance

It is not clear where the first classes were held. That same year, a one-story, two-room building, known as “Little” Central, was erected adjacent to “Big” Central School at High and Marion streets to handle the overflow from the main school. In 1868, Little Central became Salem’s “colored school.” Both school buildings were in use until 1905, when the city’s first high school was built on the grounds.

We have no record of who attended Salem’s colored school, but we do know of some families who were in the area at the time. It is likely that Roxanna and Lon, the children of Robin and Polly Holmes, attended, as well as two of William Johnson’s grandchildren, Mary Ann and Orrie. Johnson’s adopted daughter, Rosetta (Bonter), may have attended as well.³⁰



In this chapter we have seen some of the ways American racial dynamics played out in Oregon and, locally, in Marion and Polk counties over the century. The pre-statehood events described here set the stage for what the first blacks faced as they arrived on the early wagon trains—the subject of the next chapter.