

Heading West: African American Pioneer Stories

Rose Jackson

Rose Jackson came west as a slave to the Allen family in 1849. Since the Allens knew of the exclusion laws in the Oregon Territory, they planned to leave her behind, but she begged to accompany them. With the support of the Allen daughters, the family patriarch, Dr. William Allen, relented. However, since it was illegal to bring slaves into Oregon, they were forced to smuggle Rose across the length of the Oregon Trail in a box with air holes drilled in it. Rose came out only at night to stretch and get a breath of fresh air.

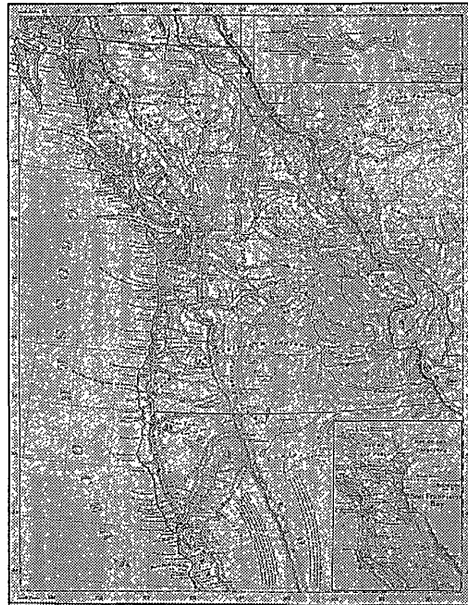
While Mrs. Allen found work as a seamstress and made \$2 a day, Rose worked as a laundress and could bring home as much as \$12 a day. Though Rose was freed when the family entered Oregon, all her earnings that first winter went to support the family.

Rose later married John Jackson, a groom for stagecoach horses in Canemah. The couple moved to Waldo Hills outside Salem and raised two children, Rose and Charles.

Moses Harris

Also known as "Black Harris", Moses Harris became a wagon train guide on the Oregon Trail after spending years exploring and fur-trapping in the mountains. He is thought to have first ventured into the West in 1823, and he was considered an expert in winter travel.

In 1836, Harris helped guide the Whitman-Spalding Party to Oregon. He is credited with having helped build Fort Laramie, and he may have been in on the



party of trappers who christened Independence Rock. In 1844, he guided a wagon train of 500 people over the Oregon Trail to Fort Vancouver — a train which included George Washington Bush and the Holmes and Ford families.

In 1845, Harris was in The Dalles when Stephen Meek stumbled into town after having gotten a wagon train lost trying to cross the high desert. Harris was the only person willing to help, and after bargaining for supplies from local Indians, he led the surviving members of Meek's party to safety at The Dalles.

Harris later helped rescue a group stranded on the Applegate Trail in southern Oregon, and he participated in efforts to explore the Cascade Mountains in search of

a route better than the Barlow Road. He continued to guide wagon trains until dying of cholera in 1849.

In 1844, James Clyman wrote a mock epitaph for his friend:

*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 heights.
He was a free and easy kind of soul
especially with a Belly full.*

George Washington

George Washington came west with the Cochrans, a White family that had adopted him as a child, in 1850. The family settled in Oregon City, where Washington got a job cutting timber for \$90 a month plus board. However, after only three months on the job, he became seriously ill and was taken to the only hospital in the area at Fort Vancouver, the former Hudson's Bay Co. trading post.

When he was given a clean bill of health, the family moved farther north to Cowlitz Landing. George moved to the site of present-day Centralia and built his own one-room cabin. He established a pole ferry on the Skookumchuck River and often opened his home to travelers.

Because of discriminatory laws, Washington could not claim his land and was technically a squatter. Still, he fenced off and cleared a 12-acre farm, owned two milk cows and was respected by Whites and Native Americans alike.

Washington's livelihood was threatened when two men decided to file a claim which

included his prime land. The Cochrans came to his aid and claimed 640 acres along the Skookumchuck, including Washington's land.

Washington purchased all 640 acres from the Cochrans for \$3200, and he went on to buy still more land in the area. He traveled to Olympia twice a year where, he met Mary Jane Cooness, a widow with one son. They were married in 1869.

In 1872, the Northern Pacific Railroad chose a route passing near Washington's land, and he decided to found a town. With the help of his wife and stepson, he platted the town of Centerville (later changed to Centralia) and filed it in 1875. Washington divided up his property into \$10 lots and offered them to anyone who would live on the land.

Washington was a generous and well-liked landlord, donating land for a park, church and cemetery and helping to build many of the first structures in town. He did not permit saloons or other disreputable businesses to become established on his property. During hard times, he forgave overdue rents and sometimes even fed and cared for sick tenants. He helped many people in Centralia buy land or start businesses by loaning them money.

George's first wife, Mary Jane, died in 1889, and he remarried the following year. In 1891, at the age of 73, he had a son. Washington later separated from his second wife but kept custody of his son. He died following a buggy accident in 1905 at the age of 87.

Stories published courtesy of the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. For more information, call 503-657-9336 or visit endoftheoregontrail.org/blaketime.html.