

# Oregon Black Pioneers (organization)

By Mary Oberst

Oregon Black Pioneers, an all-volunteer group founded in Salem in 1993, aims to preserve the rich heritage and culture of Oregon's African Americans through collections and programs that promote scholarly research and public use. Oregon Black Pioneers partners with academic consultants and history organizations throughout Oregon to conduct research, compile historical information, and present its findings through oral presentations, exhibits, and publications.

Focusing initially on Marion and Polk Counties, Oregon Black Pioneers collaborated with Friends of the Pioneer Cemetery in Salem in the discovery of more than forty Black pioneers who were buried there, in both marked and unmarked graves from the middle to the late nineteenth century. In 2007, the organization presented the City of Salem with a stone marker to honor the memory of those pioneers, with each name etched in the marker. The presentation ceremony launched an exhibit at the Reed Opera House in Salem, *Salem's Black Voices*, which told the stories of many of those pioneers.

The exhibit led to further research and the publication of *Perseverance: A History of African Americans in Oregon's Marion and Polk Counties* (2011). A second book, *African Americans of Portland* (2013), by Kimberly Stowers Moreland, describes, in words and historic images, the African American community and vibrant culture in Oregon's most populous area from the late 1800s to the Vanport flood of 1948.

Oregon Black Pioneers created four major exhibits in partnership with the Oregon Historical Society. The first, *Perseverance* (2011), highlighted the lives of early Black Oregonians, including the biographies in *Perseverance*, the book. The second exhibit, *All Aboard!* (2013), mirrored the book *African Americans of Portland* and focused on the community that grew up around Portland's Union Station from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, when Black churches, hotels, newspapers, and businesses were established. The third exhibit, *A Community on the Move* (2015), focused on the 1940s and 1950s, when Portland's vibrant African American community thrived despite a larger cultural and legal context of discrimination and displacement. The fourth exhibit, *Racing to Change: Oregon's Civil Rights Years* (2018), continued the story through the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s. *Racing to Change: The Eugene Story*, a collaboration between Oregon Black Pioneers and the University of Oregon, is on display at the Museum of Natural and Cultural History at the University of Oregon from October 2019 to May 2020.

Other work includes lectures to community groups, students, and historical societies throughout the state, as well as bus tours to private historic properties not generally accessible to the public. Oregon Black Pioneers has curated exhibits shown in many other venues, including the Oregon State Capitol, the Salem Public Library, and the Willamette Heritage Center, and volunteers have worked with museums in other counties to enhance the group's exhibits with material about African Americans.

Because of its work in preserving Oregon's Black history, the organization received the David Duniway Award for Historic Preservation in 2009 from the Marion County Historical Society, the Education Award in 2009 from the Oregon Assembly for Black Affairs, and the 2010 Heritage Award from *American Legacy* magazine. In 2017, Oregon Black Pioneers was awarded the George McMath Historic Preservation Award, which "honors significant contributions to historic preservation in the state of Oregon" for its dedication "to illuminating African Americans' contributions to Oregon's history." In 2020, *Racing to Change: The Eugene Story* garnered an Oregon Heritage Excellence Award from the Oregon Heritage Commission.

## Sources

Oregon Black Pioneers website: <http://www.oregonblackpioneers.org/blog/books/>

Moreland, Kimberly Stowers. *African Americans of Portland*. Mt. Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia, 2013.

Oregon Black Pioneers, Sheridan McCarthy, and Stanton Nelson. *Perseverance: A History of African Americans in Oregon's Marion and Polk Counties*. Salem: Oregon Northwest Black Pioneers, 2011.

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The Oregon Encyclopedia

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