

# George Putnam Riley (1833–1905)

*By Jean M. Ward*

Identified by the *Oregonian* as the “Fred[erick] Douglass of Oregon,” George P. Riley was a passionate advocate for equal rights and a leading figure in Portland's early African American community. With inspirational oratory, breadth of knowledge, and organizational skills, Riley helped advance political and economic opportunities for many.

Born in Boston on March 29, 1833, George Putnam Riley learned about courageous activism from his parents William and Elizabeth (Cook) Riley, free persons of color and abolitionists. William owned a clothing store, and the couple contributed money and effort to the abolitionist cause, including the work of William Lloyd Garrison. Elizabeth was active in the Boston Female Antislavery Society, the African-American Female Intelligence Society, and the Colored Citizens of Boston. In 1850, the year after William's death, she helped fugitive slave Shadrach Minkins escape by hiding him in her attic.

Without schooling themselves, George's parents sought education for their children—those by Elizabeth's marriage to James Jackson in 1813 and then her marriage to William Riley in 1829. When George was only a few months old, his half-brother James Jackson Jr. died at age six and was memorialized by his teacher, Susan Paul. George Riley attended public school, but colleges were closed to him because he was Black. He attended antislavery mass meetings in Boston, where he met abolitionist leader Wendell Phillips and worked in the law office of Benjamin F. Butler, later a Civil War general. To secure a living income, he became a barber.

In his early twenties, Riley followed the lure of California gold and journeyed by sea to the West Coast. While in San Francisco, he joined an 1858 convention of free Blacks who opposed California's discriminatory laws, and he accepted the invitation of James Douglas, governor of the Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, to settle in Victoria. Over time, about eight hundred Black settlers emigrated to Victoria, with some, like Riley, seeking gold on the Fraser River. For most, increased racial prejudice diminished the promise of a better life. At an 1864 public meeting in Victoria, resolutions were accepted from a committee that included Riley and Abner Hunt Francis, previously a resident of Portland. They argued that “the English colonists of Vancouver Island, in utter disregard of English law and English customs, are making a vigorous effort to place the badge of complexional distinction upon the subjects of a darker hue.”

After the Civil War, Riley visited Washington Territory and Oregon before returning to Massachusetts, where he resumed barbering and gave lectures about the Pacific Coast. He married Harriet Elizabeth Gordon of New Brunswick, Canada, on April 30, 1866, at Chelsea, Massachusetts; their one child, Bonita Louise, was born the next year.

Drawn to the West and undeterred by Oregon's Black exclusion laws, Riley arrived in Portland by early 1869; his family came later. Portland's population of about eight thousand included forty-one African American men and twenty-one women. For several months, Riley was a barber with James H. Givins at Humboldt Hair Dressing, Shaving and Bathing Saloon on Front Street.

On December 11, 1869, with Riley as president, the Workingmen's Joint Stock Association of Portland (WJSA) filed for incorporation in Oregon, with capital stock of \$50,000 (about \$958,000 in 2021 dollars). Riley and fourteen other Portlanders—twelve Black men, two Black women, and one white man—had invested in real estate to be divided proportionately. Their occupations included bootblack, barber, boot and shoemaker, domestic servant, waiter, steward, cook, general jobber, laborer, whitewasher/calsominer, plasterer, messenger, porter, and landlady.

Washington Territory permitted Blacks to purchase land. In 1869, on behalf of WJSA, Riley paid \$2,000 for twelve acres in Seattle. Two years later, the WJSA acquired fifteen more acres. Legally known as Riley's Addition, the property became part of Seattle's Beacon Hill district. In 1870, Riley purchased sixty-seven acres in Tacoma for the WJSA. The Alliance Addition, which was the basis for Tacoma's African American community, was labeled “N—r Tract,” and ownership of the land was in litigation for decades. Most WJSA members paid their taxes and held their land in Washington, and some sold at a profit. Others lost their property because of high taxes and

assessments, and the property of those who died without heirs became entangled in lawsuits. A few owners moved to their Washington properties, where they lived out their lives.

Riley had exceptional rhetorical, organizational, and political skills. He was orator for the 1870 New Year's Day Emancipation Celebration in Salem; spoke that April at Portland's Ratification Jubilee, the celebration of the 15th Amendment; and gave a talk at Portland's Philharmonic Hall on "The Colored Citizen and the Ballot." In May 1870, he became president of Portland's Sumner Union Club, a political organization that endorsed the Union Republican Party of Oregon. In 1873, when Riley presided at a state convention supporting congressional action for a civil rights bill, the *Statesman* described him as a person with "considerable celebrity as an educated man and eloquent speaker."

Riley spoke to Black, white, and mixed audiences and frequently appeared with speakers such as former Governor Addison Gibbs, Senators Joseph Dolph and John Mitchell, Harvey W. Scott of the *Oregonian*, Rev. T. L. Eliot of the Unitarian Church, and woman suffrage leaders Abigail Scott Duniway and Mary Anna Cooke Thompson. Whether he was addressing the Workingmen's Association, the Oregon State Woman Suffrage Association, the Colored Citizens of Portland, the First A.M.E. Zion Church, Portland's Colored Immigration Aid Society, or Republican rallies, audiences welcomed Riley as the "renowned colored orator."

Barbering remained Riley's trade, but he also worked at Portland's U.S. Customs House from about 1873 to 1877, during Harvey Scott's tenure as Collector of Customs. At Customs, he worked with Abigail Duniway's husband, Benjamin, and earned \$1,200 a year as a porter and messenger. At about this time, he lived with his family and three boarders at 128 College Street.

In 1887, Riley moved to his property in the Alliance Addition, where he spent the last eighteen years of his life. He was the orator for Tacoma's Annual Emancipation Day celebrations, joined other Blacks to organize a mining company near Issaquah, and was unrelenting in efforts to resolve legal disputes surrounding WJSA's properties in Tacoma. In 1904, he was elected delegate from the 10th precinct of the 3rd Ward for Tacoma's Republican Convention.

Harriet Riley died in 1896, and George died nine years later, on October 1, 1905. Both were interred at Tacoma Cemetery.

During his 1871 lecture for Portland's Young Men's Christian Association, Riley defined the highest virtues "of true manhood" and applied them to Toussaint L'Ouverture (1742–1803), the former slave and military leader of Saint-Domingo (later Haiti). In his own life, Riley not only established a remarkable record of accomplishment but clearly lived with those same virtues of "courage, spirit of liberty and persistence."

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