

Resilience, opportunity, struggle

Dianne Lugo
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Oregon State University, Oregon Black Land Trust, Oregon Black Pioneers and the Linn-Benton NAACP chapter have begun preserving and sharing the history of Letitia Carson, the only Black woman in the state to claim a homestead under 1862's Homestead Act and who won two lawsuits against a white neighbor who sold her property.

During the June-teenth weekend celebration, volunteers worked on the former Carson project in an archaeological exploration alongside OSU archaeology graduate students or alumni to excavate the land.

The dig and open house was the first opportunity for the public to gather on the land and reflect on her life while standing in the space Carson once called home, said Zachary Stocks, Executive Director of Oregon Black Pioneers.

The hope is to eventually do more programming on the land, Stocks said.

That could include clean-up days to remove invasive plants and replace them with native species. Stocks said it also could be courses or educational opportunities related to sustainable farming, similar to the work done by partner Black Oregon Land Trust. The organization provides training for Black farmers in Oregon to continue traditional practices tied to the production of food.

Oregon Black Pioneers have been involved in the Letitia Carson Legacy Project since the beginning. They were approached by the Oregon State University College of Agriculture, which currently owns the property where her home

was and uses the land as a cattle ranch.

Stocks said that Lauren Gwin, associate director for OSU's Center for Small Farms, gathered the Linn-Benton NAACP and Black Oregon Land Trust to join Black Oregon Pioneers to think about ways to recognize Carson, her story and her land which was never developed or had additional structures built on it.

Carson's story

Carson, a slave or former slave, arrived in Oregon in 1845 with a white man named David Carson, according to a digital exhibit on Oregon's Secretary of State's website. The nature of their relationship is unclear but they had traveled more than 2,000 miles from Missouri.

Carson gave birth to a daughter, Martha, during the journey from May to October, the exhibit states. The Carsons settled on a 640-acre land claim, the amount entitled to married couples. The land was halved in 1850 because Black Americans were not eligible to file land claims in Oregon and the Carsons were unmarried. Their son, Adam, was born in 1849.

David Carson died in 1852 without a will. A neighbor, Greenberry Smith, was made executor of David's estate. Smith did not recognize Letitia or her children as David's rightful heirs. In 1853, Smith sold the land and all of Carson's possessions.

Carson settled in Oregon between the state's 1849 exclusion law that prohibited "negro or mulatto" people from entering into or residing in the territory and the ratification of the state constitution in 1857 that banned blacks in the state from owning real estate, voting, or using the legal system.



Shawn Joy, volunteer and professional archeologist with Search Inc., sifts through backfill during an archaeological dig at the homestead site of Letitia Carson, one of the first Black women to live in Oregon, in Adair Village on Saturday.

PHOTOS BY BRIAN HAYES/SALEM STATESMAN JOURNAL

Carson sued Smith and David's estate twice. In 1855, an all-white male jury sided with Letitia who argued that she was entitled to \$7,450 for the seven years she had worked on the land and for the sale of their cattle and possessions. The jury awarded her \$300 for her work and another \$229.50 for her court and legal costs. The next year, a federal judge and another local jury awarded her an additional \$1,400 in damages for the sale of their cattle.

In 1863, after moving to Douglas County, Carson filed a claim for 160 acres under the Homestead Act of 1862. Her claim was certified in 1869, making her the only Black woman in Oregon to successfully secure a homestead claim, according to the exhibit. Carson died in 1888.

Legacy project

The importance of the Carson lands is described on the Oregon Black Pioneers' website: The land is a rare and unique resource to "explore the concepts of home, freedom, and justice" and without any development, it remains a relatively intact space to connect with Black Oregon history.

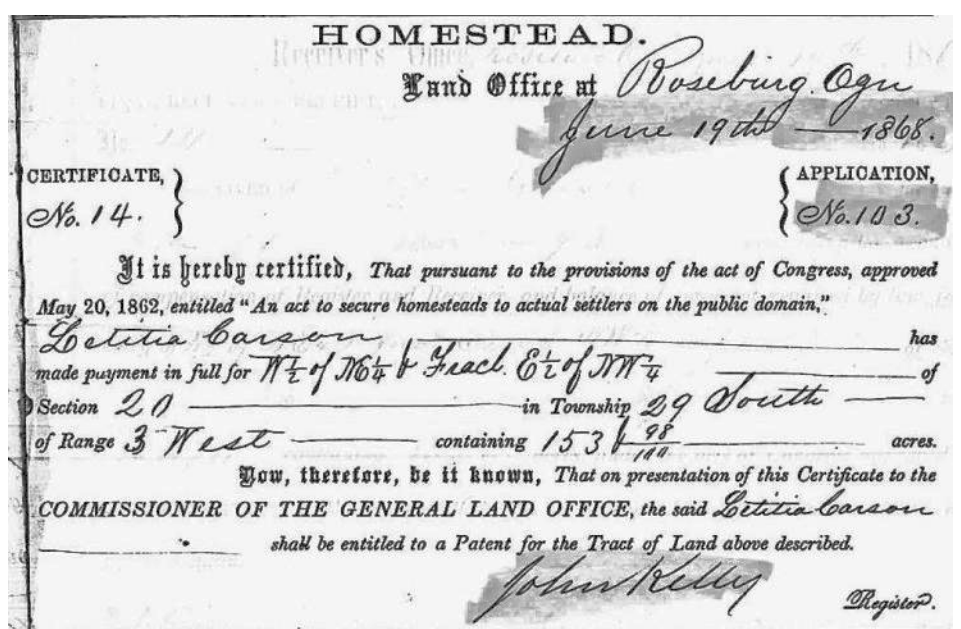


Photo of Letitia Carson's Homestead certificate OREGON SECRETARY OF STATE

"There are so few spaces where you can stand and see the land the same way it would have been seen by 19th century Black Oregonians...anytime we get to come and be here it's sort of like we're standing shoulder to shoulder with her and her children," Stocks said.

Principal investigator of archaeology Cayla Hill described the archaeology dig as an "exciting project." Volunteers were digging at test sites around the former Carson land to explore and further pinpoint where structures like the cabin might have once

stood. The hope is to find items to interpret Carson's life further.

"It's exploratory to see what we can find out about the homestead," Hill said.

Heavy rain this spring means people were unable to drive onto the land itself. While the challenge to access the land means some people wanting to visit and volunteer were unable to, Stocks said the walk to the site is one Letitia Carson would have had to make herself.

"Perhaps during that walk, folks can use it as an opportunity to think about the everyday realities of our

Black ancestors in Oregon 170 plus years ago," he said.

The Saturday event was intentionally hosted during the Juneteenth weekend. It is a time to share stories of resiliency and opportunity and of struggles, Stocks said.

"All of those things are embodied in the Letitia Carson story and so we couldn't think of a better time than Juneteenth to bring people together at the land and think about those things."

Dianne Lugo covers equity and social justice. You can reach her at dlugo@statesmanjournal.com or on Twitter at @DianneLugo.

Obituaries

Virginia Amelia Wolf Sessums

SILVERTON - Virginia Amelia Wolf Sessums, 82, of Silverton, Oregon, passed away peacefully at home with family at her side.

Virginia was born in Bismarck, North Dakota to Jacob and Philomena Wolf. She was one of 11 children, (Clara, John, Mary, Cecelia, Gabe Agnes, Ruth, Bernie, Leon and Irene.)



After a tornado destroyed their farm, they moved to Oregon, purchasing a small farm in Silverton.

Virginia graduated from St. Paul Catholic School and Silverton High School.

She was a devoted, loving, wonderful mother and grandma. She loved watching her family grow, enjoying all of her family reunions and get together with her brothers and sisters. Virginia enjoyed cooking big meals for all her guests. She also loved her trips to Central Oregon, the Coast or just a drive in the country to see the beauty held within.

She is survived by her husband of 53 years, Wallace Sessums, 4 daughters and 1 son; Vicki (Dan) Ort; Sherri O'Dell, Troy (Angela) Douglas, Jennifer Sessums Mink, Nicole Sessums Skinner. 16 grandkids, Danny, Shaun, Dustin & Shayna Ort; Rachel, Jason, Sara & Jordon O'Dell; Clayton, Shelby & Zachery Douglas; Tristin & Madison Mink; Logan, Sawyer & Preston Skinner. And 16 great grandkids.

Virginia is preceded in death by her parents Jacob & Philomena Wolf, brothers John & Gabe, sisters Clara, Agnes, Ruth, Bernie.

A celebration of life will be held later. Arrangements with Unger Funeral Chapel - Silverton

Turner's Angel's Share Barrel House announces closure

Em Chan
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

On Thursday, owners of Angel's Share Barrel House said they would be closing the business after three years.

The taphouse opened about a year before the pandemic, which owners Chad and Melissa Casady described as "ten glorious months." Sunday, June 19, will be the last operating day.

"Angel's Share Barrel House was born from a love of good beer and good food," the Casadys wrote in a Facebook post. "The year that followed (after the pandemic began) was tough, to say the least. On top of that, as some of you may know, one year ago our family was shocked with a life changing health diagnosis.

"We have to focus on the time we have with our family. We held on as long as we could. We pushed hard but in the end, it wasn't enough to overcome all obstacles... We would love to see Angel's Share Barrel House live on."

The couple wrote if anyone was interested in buying the business that they should "reach out."



Angel's Share Barrel House in Turner. ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

"We have valued and appreciated our customers, our fantastic employees and the Turner community and we will miss being a part of the daily growth of our amazing little town," the Casadys wrote on their Facebook post. "We thank you for your patronage and support over the years, and we'll carry the lessons and friendships

forward as we navigate this next chapter as a family."

Address: 5420 Denver St. SE, Turner

Em Chan covers food and dining at the Statesman Journal. You can reach her at echan@statesmanjournal.com, follow her on Twitter @catchuptoemily or see what she's eating on Instagram @sikfanmei.aih.

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