



Williams Avenue looking north taken in 1920. In the foreground is the Tivoli Theater. (Photo Courtesy of Oregon Historical Society)

## Senator Williams of Oregon; Author of Radical Reconstruction

Senator George H. Williams, one of the founders of Albina, who made Oregon's first court decision involving slavery and is credited with preventing Oregon's becoming a slave state, wrote the Tenure-of-Office Act, wrote the Reconstruction Laws and led the impeachment proceedings against President Johnson. He fought for the rights of blacks and so fortified his career, but in old age succumbed to Oregon's "southern exposure".

George H. Williams arrived in Oregon in 1853, having been appointed the first Chief Justice of the Court of the Oregon Territory at the age of 30. One of the first cases he heard was the petition by Robin Holmes, a former slave, to have his children declared free. Holmes, his wife and his children, and another black man had been brought to Oregon by a slaveholder from Missouri. The three adults had obtained their own freedom, but the children were held by their owner, Nathaniel Ford. Ford claimed the slaves had been his property legally in Missouri, and that after he had brought them to Oregon he had freed the adults but retained the children, whom he planned to free at the age of 21. Judge Williams returned the children to the care and custody of their parents, stating that "without some positive legislative enactment establishing slavery here, it did not and could not exist in Oregon." As far as is known this was the last attempt to hold slaves legally in Oregon.

For years Oregon had agitated to become a state, feeling oppressed by Territorial rule from Washington, D.C. Statehood was connected with the slavery question, because it was necessary to determine whether Oregon would enter the Union as a free state or as a slave state. Oregon was at that time predominantly Democratic and most influential Democrats were sympathetic with the pro-slavery viewpoint. None was abolitionist. Although not yet admitted as a state, a Constitutional Convention was called in June of 1857 to write a State Constitution. Unable to reach a decision on slavery and unwilling

to take the political consequences of a decision, the Convention decided to put the issue to a vote of the people. This question, as well as the Constitution, was to be voted on November of 1857.

During the months preceding the election, debate reached a fever pitch and there was serious probability that slavery would be accepted in Oregon. At this time Judge Williams wrote his "Free State Letter" in the Oregon Statesman, which is credited with turning the tide from slavery. Avoiding the moral and legal issue, Williams said slavery should be avoided in Oregon because it was not practical for this area. Industry was seasonal and slaves would be costly to support during long months of inactivity, small farms and lumbering were not conducive to the use of slaves, and there was the danger of escaped slaves joining warring Indians.

The Constitution was adopted by the people on November 9, 1857. They turned down slavery by a 4 to 1 vote. They also voted, by an 8 to 1 margin, to bar the residence of blacks in Oregon. This was a continuation of laws of the Provisional and Territorial Governments. Oregon was admitted to the Union on February 14, 1859.

Williams was a Democrat in a predominantly Democratic State. He had been popular with politicians and a member of the "Salem Clique" which dominated Oregon politics. With the publishing of his "Free State Letter", he soon lost favor with the party. Williams had ambitions of being one of Oregon's first senators, but when the legislature met to elect, he was not chosen. He again presented himself for election when the terms expired in 1860 and 1861 and again when Senator Baker was killed in 1862, but was not elected until 1864. By then the political situation had changed, with the Democrats split into two factions and a small Republican party allied with the Union Democrats.

Within a month of Williams' arrival in Washington, the Civil War ended. Williams became a Republican, opposed

President Johnson and became a radical reconstructionist. During this period he was influential on the side of those who advocated a military rule in the South. He was the author of the Tenure-in-Office Act, which was designed to prevent President Andrew Johnson from replacing Lincoln appointees. He wrote the Reconstruction Act, which placed the Confederate States in the hands of military governors and planned the reorganization and reconstruction of the South. He supported the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments and was a strong advocate of the black vote. Senator Williams was one of the leaders of the unsuccessful impeachment proceedings against President Johnson.

These activities cost him support in Oregon. All elements in Oregon were vehement in the denial of the desirability of emancipation and in their denunciation of the abolitionists. The earlier anti-black attitudes and the desire to remain apart from problems of slavery continued during the war years. The Southern secessionists and the Northern abolitionists were accorded equal blame for the war. Oregon sent no troops and no support for the war although individual citizens fought on both sides.

The 1865 State Senate passed the 13th Amendment but the House refused to vote. The 1866 Legislative Assembly ratified the 14th Amendment; the 1868 Legislature repealed the ratification and asked Senators Williams and Henry Corbett to resign. The 1870 Legislature rejected the 15th Amendment and resolved "that the so-called 15th Amendment is an infringement upon popular rights and a direct falsification of the pledges made to the state of Oregon by the federal government." The Oregonian said of the black vote, "The man who knowing the situation and ignorance of the African race in our country, favors the extension of the privileges of citizenship to them is surely reckless." The Democratic State Convention of 1868 was "opposed to sharing with the

servile races the priceless political heritage achieved alone by white men and by them transmitted to their posterity." Until 1872 the question of black rights dominated Oregon politics although few blacks lived in the state. Senator Williams realized his actions would not bring him favor in Oregon. He wrote, "I am well aware that there is in Oregon a wide spread prejudice against the negro race and have no doubt that my course in reference to the Freedman's Bureau and the Civil Rights Bill will be unsatisfactory to some of my friends."

Williams was defeated in his bid for re-election. He was appointed to the office of Attorney-General of the United States by President Grant and was unanimously confirmed by the Senate.

In 1873 he was nominated by Grant as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Strong opposition in Oregon, as well as social indiscretions on the part of his wife, caused President Grant to request his withdrawal.

Williams returned to Oregon and in 1902, at the age of 79, he was elected Mayor of Portland. His term of office was mediocre and without significance to black Portlanders who had expected him to bring relief from restrictive practices.

In his old age, speaking of his life as a Judge, and Senator, and Attorney-General, he said, "There is little doubt that in the controversy over the restoration of the rebel states much was said and done by both parties that might better have been omitted, but it must be remembered that while the clash of arms had ceased, the clash of feelings had not subsided, and it was impossible to subdue these feelings at once with the close of the war as it would be to stop the waves of the ocean after a tempest had stirred it to its depths. I took an active part in these proceedings from the beginning to the end, and now in reviewing the subject, I do not see that I made any serious mistakes, unless it was with negro suffrage."

## Editorials from Oregon History

Let's Keep Grants Pass a White Man's Town

(Front page editorial - Southern Oregon Spectator May 24, 1924)

Grants Pass has always been a white man's town and there is no reason under the shining sun why it shouldn't continue to be a white man's town. The fact that this is a white man's country here in this wonderful Rogue River Valley has brought the best of the white race here and such population will bring the cream of the white race here in the future.

The attitudes of the people of this peaceful, law abiding community toward the encroachment of the black, brown or red faces of the land, or the world for that matter is:

NIGGER WE DON'T WANT YOU HERE - AND WE WON'T HAVE YOU HERE - YOU HAD BETTER ROLL UP YOUR BED AND RIDE - THIS IS TO BE A WHITE MAN'S COUNTRY, YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND FOREVER.

WHO WANTS GRANTS PASS TO BE THE SCENE OF A RACE RIOT? WHO WANTS TO SEE the property values slump in Josephine County? Who wants to see the handiwork of years pass into the hands of a designing black race who don't belong in Oregon and who will only cause trouble if they try to come here?

Foreigners of any kind are not wanted in this community that is made up of peaceful white people who are striving to live, move and have their living in peace with the world, under the law that God has laid down for man to obey...

The Oregonian - editorial, May 20, 1905

It is obvious that any place of public amusement would speedily lose patronage if it were not understood that certain discriminations would be made. If one person - a Chinaman for example - has a right to buy any seat in the house and sit in it, so many other persons - a Hotentot, or a woman of notorious reputation - do the same thing. It is not a question as to whether a white man objects to sitting next to a Chinaman. It is simply a well-known fact that he does object, and the theater must govern itself accordingly.

It may be assumed that a self-respecting person, like the plaintiff in the case just decided by Judge Frazer, will not hereafter in this state try to infringe upon the rules that forbid persons of his color from being seated in certain parts of the theater. It is fair to presume that no such person desires to intrude where he is not wanted, and where, were he to succeed in gaining entrance, he would be subjected to glances of surprise if not of contempt and indignation.

Fact, not justice in the abstract enters into this contention. Colored people are wise who accept conditions that they cannot change or control, and go their way cheerfully, realizing that, after all, their condition in this country is much improved over that of their ancestors of a century or two ago.

The social status, whether of races or individuals cannot be fixed by act of Congress, nor by force in any direction, or from any source. The Frazer decision was made to cover all persons... but it is sufficiently specific to give colored persons a hint that, if taken in a friendly spirit, will protect them from annoyance and discomfiture upon this score in the future. The decision of Judge Frazer in the case is probably good law, it is clearly good sense.

(This decision supported a court decision that upheld the right of a theater to refuse to honor a box seat ticket purchased by Oliver Taylor, a black Pullman car conductor. The decision was upheld by the Oregon Supreme Court.)

The Oregonian - editorial, September 26, 1909

Work, for which negroes are fitted, and encouragement to perform it, rather than agitation along political and social lines, is the cue to the development and usefulness of the negro race in America, as furnished by that stalwart man of the race, Booker T. Washington. The South draws a sharp line at the kind of labor these people are fitted for, and is insistent that they keep the place assigned to an inferior race in the social and political world by the sacred tradition of the old South.

This is not strange. It would be strange, indeed, if it were otherwise. The negro, cheerful, submissive, respectful, even lazy, when left to his own industrial inclinations holds a place in the hearts of Southern people from which he is totally excluded in the North. It is only when they essay to become factors in the political life of the state, or assume the swaggering air of social equality, or yielding to gross animal instincts, become veritable untamed beasts that the race question takes a serious import in the South.

The Advocate - editorial December 12, 1908

(The Advocate was a black owned newspaper established in Portland in 1903. It was published until 1928 by E.D. Cannady and Rev. W. W. Mathews.)

The intelligent Afro-American wants to be measured by the standard of manhood, and not by color. They do not ask special favors, nor do they want lifts from the government, but we do want the right to walk as men unimpeded.

The Portland New Age - editorial November 17, 1906

(The New Age was a black owned newspaper published in Portland from 1896 until 1906)

The Negroes must be accepted as part of the citizenry of the country and treated accordingly. If they violate the laws punish them. Encourage them by all possible means to work, to be industrious and honest and to become independent. But they are not to be exterminated nor expatriated. There is no need of full social equality, and it is not or should not be desired on one side more than on the other.

There is no social equality among white people either and no great fuss is made about it. But colored people ought to be accorded their political rights and encouraged to prize American citizenship by political recognition. If both races would behave themselves better and work more and talk less, and each attend to its own business, and recognize other's rights, the "race" problem would soon dwindle into insignificance.



An unidentified black woman, probably from Portland. (Photo Courtesy of Oregon Historical Society)



Many black cowboys rode the range in the west. Above, an unidentified black cowboy rides "Hot Foot" at the Pendleton Roundup. (Oregon Historical Society Photo)

### MR. GEO P. RILEY, THE ELOQUENT COLORED SPEAKER.

Will speak at PHILHARMONIC HALL, TUESDAY EVENING, APRIL 26th 1870.

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Two unidentified black cooks pose on the steps of the Southern Pacific dining car in 1919. (Photo Courtesy of Oregon Historical Society)

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