

African American Pioneer

Columbus Sewell defied exclusion laws to make a life in Grant County

By JUSTIN DAVIS
Blue Mountain Eagle

CANYON CITY — Columbus Sewell, who settled in Grant County in the mid-19th century, was a pioneer in more ways than one.

An African American resident of the area in the 1860s, Sewell was able to carve out a life for himself and his family despite Oregon's history of exclusion laws that discouraged or outright prohibited Blacks from settling in the state.

The exclusion laws were superseded by the 14th Amendment to the Constitution in 1868, although the laws wouldn't be repealed by Oregon voters until 1926. Furthermore, language that can be interpreted as racist wasn't removed from Oregon's Constitution until 2002.

Information obtained from the Grant County Museum with the help of Zachary Stocks of Oregon Black Pioneers states that Sewell was born in 1820 in Virginia and served in the Black Hawk War, fighting under Gen. Winfield Scott in the conflict between the United States and Native Americans headed by Sauk tribal leader Black Hawk.

Sewell came out West following the discovery of gold in California in the late 1840s.

In either 1862 or 1863 Sewell made his way to Canyon City, operating a gold claim with other individuals a few miles outside town. Sewell worked the claim for a time before moving into the freight business.

Stocks believes that Sewell started his freight business sometime around 1865, although he still had his gold mining claim at that time. By 1870, the census listed Sewell's occupation as teamster (wagon driver).

Sewell operated a single wagon with 12 horses during his time running freight between Canyon City and The Dalles, a round-trip journey that took six weeks in the mid- to late 1860s.

One of Sewell's earliest recorded exploits from his hauling days is a story from Oregon Inn-Side News that recounts an 1864 winter storm that rendered the roads in and around The Dalles impassable.

E.C. Pease, a merchant in The Dalles around that time, recalled Sewell being stuck in The Dalles in the early winter of 1884 due to a severe storm.

The storm left The Dalles with no way to get horses into town, so a number of V-type wooden plows were constructed with the intention of clearing the snow-covered roads.

Pease recalls that Sewell "saved our lives" through the use of those plows with his team, which allowed other horses to be brought into The Dalles. "Columbus Sewell with his twelve horses became our street cleaning department, making them passable," Pease said.

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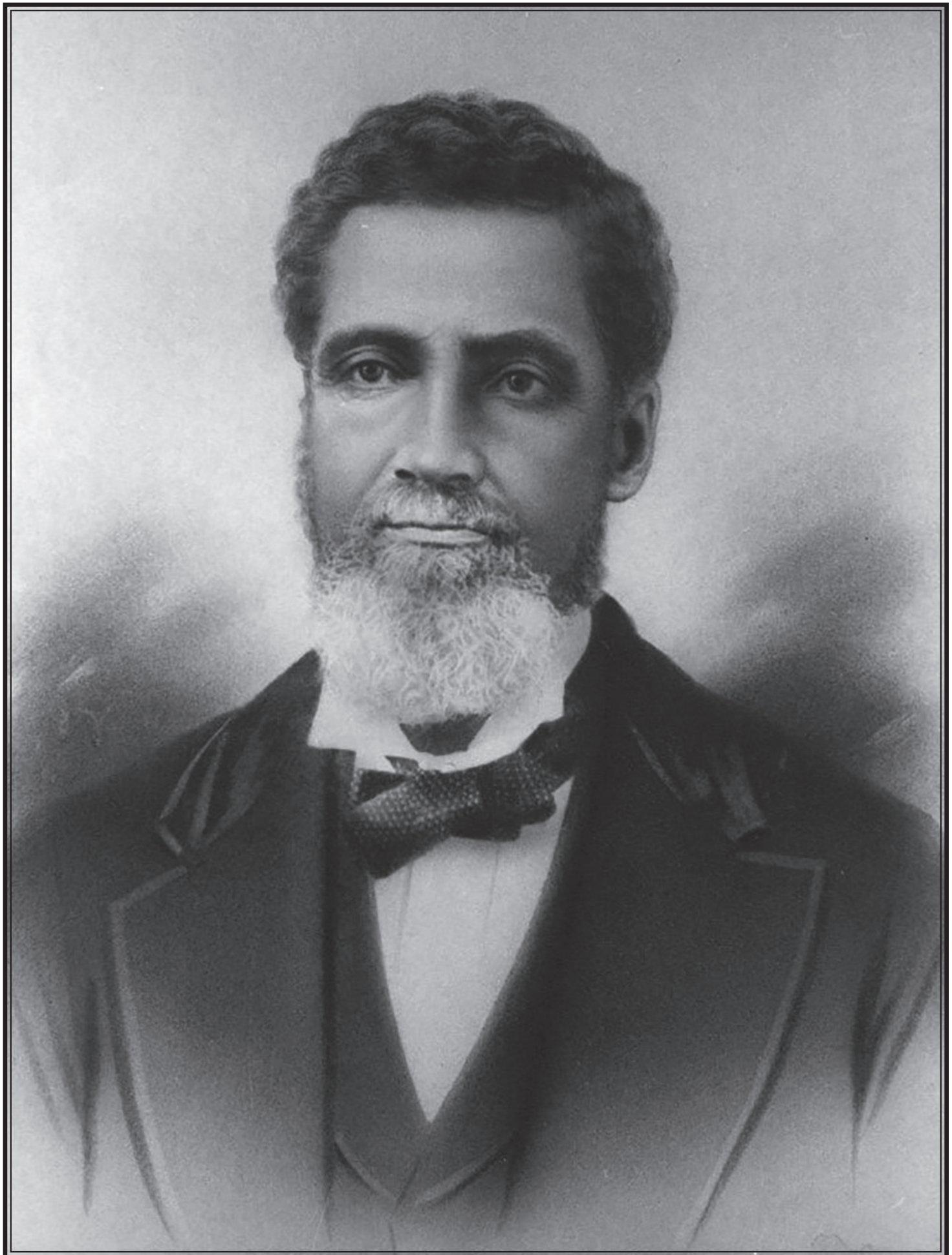
ON THE MAP

Columbus Sewell's name could soon be attached to a Grant County landmark.

The Oregon Black Pioneers have proposed that Negro Knob, a 4,800-foot mountain about seven miles north of Kimberly within the Umatilla National Forest, be renamed Columbus Sewell Knob.

Oregon landmarks with the word "negro" are in their second phase of renaming following an effort in the 1960s to replace an even more offensive term with the word "negro."

The Oregon Geographic Names Board voted unanimously to forward the name change recommendation to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names on Saturday, Aug. 20.



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Columbus Sewell came to Grant County in the early 1860s and carved out a life for himself and his family despite Oregon exclusion laws designed to keep African Americans out of the state.



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Group of people standing in front of the original Elkhorn Hotel, circa 1894. The building burned in 1898.



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Columbus Sewell, prospector. Sewell operated a gold claim in Canyon City starting in the early 1860s.

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