

R. GREGORY NOKES

BREAKING
C H A I N S

SLAVERY ON TRIAL
in the Oregon Territory

Breaking Chains

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SLAVERY ON TRIAL IN THE OREGON TERRITORY

R. GREGORY NOKES

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*To my late grandparents, Minnie and Will Junkin of Tigard,
Oregon, whose mention of a slave in a family genealogy
brought me to this story.*

Reuben Shipley, a negro boy, residing a few miles south of here on Marys river, died on Wednesday.

(Benton Democrat, Corvallis, Oregon; July 26, 1872)

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Prologue

I owe an apology to Billy Taylor. It's not his real name, of course. Too much time has gone by for me to remember that. I believe he came from Virginia. But I'm not sure of that either. It was some place in the South.

Billy had come to Portland to spend a summer with his grandparents. They lived on the corner of Everett Street and Thirty-Second Avenue, a half-block down Everett from where I lived. Billy was a friendly kid—lanky, sandy hair, a big grin, twelve or so, same as me. We became instant friends for a time, not best friends, but friends.

However, in the year just ended at Laurelhurst Grade School, I'd been taught a brief history of slavery and the Civil War, an over-simplified narrative I interpreted as follows: North good, South bad; North fighting to free slaves, South fighting to keep slaves.

Of course, in my all-white neighborhood in virtually all-white Portland, there was but a single African American in our school. I had no idea how the North treated blacks. I do recall my sole black classmate, whom I didn't get to know very well, would occasionally come to school in a sweater with holes in it. A kid who didn't have holes in his sweaters remembers things like that.

But back to Billy. For some reason, which I don't recall, another neighborhood chum and I turned on Billy one day, and he became for us a contrived enemy. We used his southern background as a weapon, accusing him of supporting slavery and the Confederacy. We began calling him a Reb, which wasn't so bad. But the name-calling soon got uglier.

We taunted him. We refused to play with him. I hate to think we might even have thrown dirt clods at him once. There was one particularly sad afternoon, possibly the last time I saw Billy, when he left us in tears, head down, walking along Thirty-Second Avenue, back toward his grandparents' home, with us yelling and laughingly calling him names.

Kids can be cruel. No news there. But no excuse either. I'd guess that was one kid who never wanted to return to our City of Roses.

What I didn't know then, but I know now, is that we in Oregon had no reason to be smug about our attitudes and policies toward African Americans and other minorities. Indeed, our own history is shameful.

Witness:

- Many of our early leaders were pro-slavery.
- Serious debate was given to whether Oregon should become a slave state.

- There were slaves in Oregon and no one seemed to care much.
- Most of those who opposed slavery in the early years did so largely for economic reasons—moral issues were an afterthought.

Consider also the great shame of our black exclusion laws. Bad enough that a black exclusion clause was written into Oregon’s constitution in 1857. Worse that it wasn’t removed until 1926.

Moreover, I’ve faced personal regret on recently learning that a distant ancestor brought a slave to Oregon.

Darrell Millner, professor of black studies at Portland State University, said we shouldn’t necessarily apply today’s standards to events of the past. He is correct, of course. But we shouldn’t hide our past either. And we have done this in Oregon. Our history books may boast that we had anti-slavery laws on our books from the earliest days of white settlement, but they overlook that slave owners were initially given three years to free their slaves. Three years! Turn this around. It meant that for individual slaves and slaveholders, slavery might be lawful for three years.

Ask any school teacher about our past sympathies and flirtations with slavery. You are likely to get a blank stare. Ask residents of liberal Lane County if they know of the pro-slavery background of one of Oregon’s first U.S. senators, Joseph Lane, for whom the county was named in 1851. Who remembers today that members of the Oregon delegation to the 1860 Democratic National Convention walked out in solidarity with delegates from slave states? Few may know that Joseph Lane ran for vice president in 1860 on a secessionist ticket with John Breckinridge of South Carolina—against Abraham Lincoln.

Author Barry Lopez wrote that after moving to Oregon from New York in 1968, he was quickly disabused of any preconceptions about Oregon as a bastion of liberal orthodoxy. Behind the stories of courageous white settlers, he discovered “the fuller story of settlement that every state seeks to diminish or manipulate in presenting itself.”¹

In Oregon, this disconcerting history included the plundering of Indian lands, the rescinding, in 1868, of the state’s 1866 ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment (guaranteeing citizenship and basic civil rights for African Americans); the formation of violent anti-Chinese leagues in Portland in the 1880s; and, later, the state’s collusion in the development of a reckless system of commercial exploitation of the region’s natural resources, especially timber. This uncomplimentary account tended to undermine the twentieth century image of western Oregon as a modern American Eden, an idyll many young people invested in and believed

*would unfold there in the years following Woodstock and the Summer of Love.*²



If I were in school again, I would want to understand the real history of our state, not a sanitized version that misleads us into myths and misplaced self-satisfaction. We can learn from our past. We should.

My intention with this book is to penetrate some of the myths we have about our heritage as it relates to slavery and our attitudes toward—and treatment of—people of color. We were not untainted by everything that slavery represented. Yes, we declared ourselves early on as opposed to slavery. But we also declared ourselves early on as opposed to having African Americans among us. This book will try to explain how these two positions were related, and to show that we in the Pacific Northwest were very much a part of the national turmoil and debate over slavery.

We had our own serious flirtation with the dark side of our nation's history. We were part of the problem.

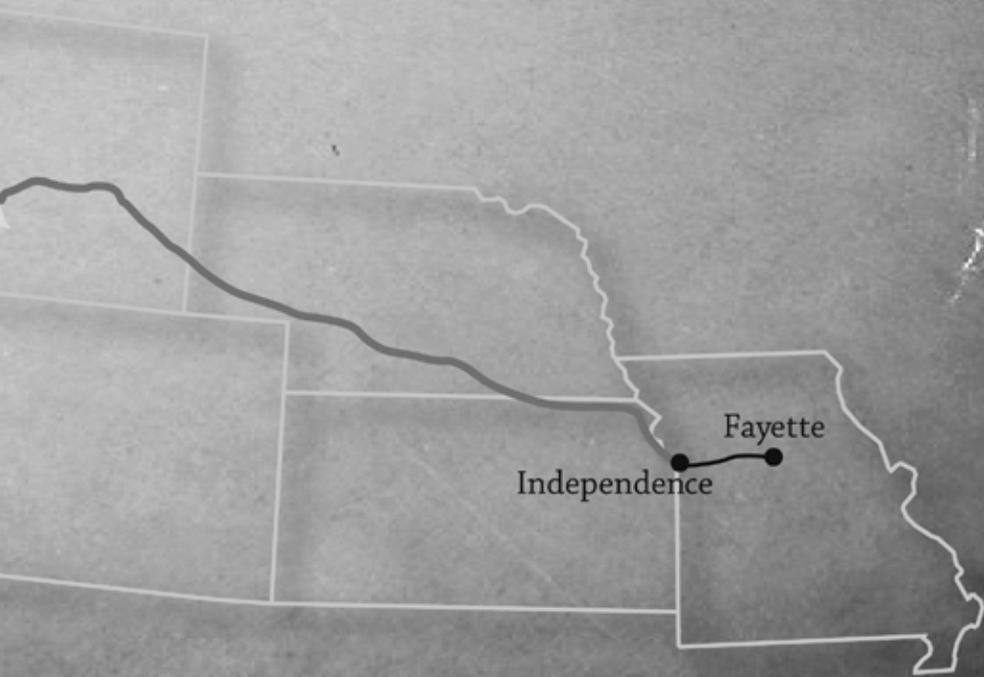


Billy, if you ever chance to read this, you will remember the pain I caused on those summer afternoons. Kids don't forget things like that.

R. Gregory Nokes
January 1, 2013



- Oregon Trail —————
- Applegate Trail - - - - -
- California Trail ······



DATES AND EVENTS

July 13, 1787—Congress enacts the Northwest Ordinance, which prohibits slavery in the new Northwest Territory north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River, effectively establishing the Ohio as the boundary between slave states and non-slave states.

Treaty of 1818—Provides for joint British and American occupation and settlement of the Oregon Country.

Missouri Compromise of 1820—Prohibits slavery in new territories north of a theoretical line drawn from the southern boundary of Missouri, except within Missouri.

May 2, 1843—Early inhabitants of Oregon Country meet at Champoege to establish a provisional government.

July 5, 1843—Early settlers and others approve an organic act for the provisional government, which includes a prohibition against slavery.

December 25, 1843—The first major emigrant wagon train from Missouri, initially led by Peter Burnett, arrives at The Dalles.

June 18, 1844—The provisional government enacts the region's first exclusion law against blacks, with "lash law" punishment.

December 7, 1844—Nathaniel Ford's wagon train from Missouri arrives in Oregon City with slaves Robin and Polly Holmes, the Holmeses' three children, and another adult slave named Scott.

December 19, 1844—The exclusion law is modified to eliminate corporal punishment, but with a new forced-labor penalty for free blacks who refuse to leave.

July 25, 1845—Voters approve a new organic act with an anti-slavery provision, but no exclusion law, effectively abolishing the 1844 law before it takes effect.

June 15, 1846—The Oregon Treaty with Great Britain is approved, giving the United States jurisdiction over the Oregon Country south of the 49th parallel.

May 30, 1848—United States and Mexico ratify the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the war with Mexico and conceding to the United States present-day California, Nevada, and Utah, most of New Mexico and Arizona, and parts of Wyoming and Colorado.

August 14, 1848—Congress establishes the Oregon Territory with the provisional government's anti-slavery law intact. The new territory embraces all of the Pacific Northwest south of the 49th parallel and east to the Rocky Mountains.

- September 21, 1849*—The new Oregon Territorial Legislature enacts a second exclusion law against blacks, although it doesn't apply to existing residents.
- Sometime in 1849*—The Ford family undertakes its gold-mining expedition to California, taking along the slaves Robin Holmes and Scott.
- Sometime in 1850*—Nathaniel Ford gives Robin and Polly Holmes their freedom, but keeps three of their children.
- September 18, 1850*—Congress enacts the Compromise of 1850—with a new Fugitive Slave Act—that clears the way for California statehood.
- September 27, 1850*—The Donation Land Act for Oregon is enacted, providing up to a square mile of free land for the earliest settlers.
- September 2, 1851*—Oregon's 1849 exclusion law is enforced against Jacob Vanderpool, the only instance of an African American being expelled under one of Oregon's exclusion laws.
- April 16, 1852*—Former slave Robin Holmes files a custody suit against Nathaniel Ford, seeking freedom for his children.
- March 2, 1853*—Congress establishes the Washington Territory north of the Columbia River.
- July 13, 1853*—Judge George Williams rules in favor of Robin Holmes in his custody case, returning his children. It is the only slave case adjudicated in Oregon courts.
- September 1, 1853*—Robert Shipley arrives in Oregon from Missouri with his slave Reuben Shipley.
- May 1, 1854*—Oregon's 1849 exclusion law is repealed.
- May 30, 1854*—The Kansas-Nebraska Act is enacted by Congress, repealing the Missouri Compromise of 1820.
- March 6, 1857*—U.S. Supreme Court issues Dred Scott decision denying citizenship and constitutional protections to African Americans, whether slave or free.
- July 28, 1857*—Judge Williams' Free State Letter, arguing slavery won't work in Oregon, is published in the *Oregon Statesman*.
- August 18, 1857*—The Oregon Constitutional Convention convenes in Salem.
- November 9, 1857*—Voters approve Oregon's constitution with both a prohibition against slavery and an exclusion clause barring African Americans.
- July 18, 1857*—Former slave Reuben Shipley marries Mary Jane Holmes.
- February 14, 1859*—Oregon gains statehood, the only free state admitted into the union with an exclusion clause in its constitution.

November 6, 1860—Abraham Lincoln is elected President.

April 12, 1861—The Civil War opens with a Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in South Carolina.

May 11, 1861—Reuben and Mary Jane Holmes Shipley donate three acres of farmland in Benton County for the Mt. Union Cemetery, stipulating it be open to burials of both blacks and whites.

January 1, 1863—President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation takes effect, freeing slaves in the Confederate states.

April 9, 1865—General Robert E. Lee surrenders at Appomattox, bringing the Civil War to a close.

December 5, 1865—Oregon ratifies the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, abolishing slavery.

September 19, 1866—Oregon ratifies the Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing citizenship and equal protection of laws to African Americans. The amendment renders Oregon's exclusion clause irrelevant, although it remains in the state constitution until 1926.

October 15, 1868—The Oregon legislature repeals its ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, although its action has no effect because the amendment has been ratified by enough other states.

July 1872—Reuben Shipley dies of smallpox.

August 15, 1875—Mary Jane Holmes Shipley marries Alfred Drake.

November 2, 1900—Oregon voters reject a proposal to repeal the exclusion clause in the constitution.

January 13, 1926—Mary Jane Holmes Shipley Drake dies.

November 2, 1926—Oregon voters finally repeal the constitution's exclusion clause.

March 13, 1946—Edward Ficklin, the last surviving child of Reuben Shipley and Mary Jane Holmes Shipley, dies in Portland.

February 15, 1959—The Oregon State Legislature ratifies the Fifteenth Amendment granting voting rights to African Americans, eighty years after it became law. Notwithstanding Oregon's inaction, the Oregon Supreme Court had ruled in 1870 that African Americans could vote because the amendment was the law of the land.

May 21, 1973—The Oregon legislature re-ratifies the Fourteenth Amendment.

May 30, 1981—A granite memorial is dedicated at the entrance to the Mt. Union Cemetery in honor of Reuben Shipley and Mary Jane Holmes Shipley Drake.

First Slaves

There are two versions of how Robin and Polly Holmes, both Missouri slaves, came to Oregon. One, told by Robin Holmes, is that his owner, Nathaniel Ford, persuaded him to come in exchange for his freedom. The other, told by Ford descendants, is that Holmes begged to come and Ford brought Holmes—and Holmes' wife and children—against his better judgment.

Whichever version is correct, and Holmes' version is certainly the most believable, the family of slaves joined a wagon train of fifty-four wagons in 1844 for an eight-month journey along the Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri. It was among the first emigrant wagon trains to leave for Oregon, and Robin and Polly Holmes would be among the first African Americans to live in Oregon.¹ They brought their three small children, and settled with the Ford family in what is now Polk County.

Years later, Holmes and Ford would face each other in a landmark court case that would help shape Oregon's policy toward slavery and slaves. The case was a *habeas corpus* suit brought by Holmes against Ford in 1852 seeking custody of his children, whom Ford tried to keep. A remarkable feature of the case is that it provides a rare written record of the relationship between a slave owner and a slave—from the slave's point of view.

Just as remarkable is the fact that a former slave managed to hold his own in a fourteen-month legal battle, which no judge seemed to want to decide. Holmes patiently stood his ground as the proceedings plodded through several Oregon courts before four different judges, at least one of whom appeared biased in favor of Ford. Holmes would demonstrate during the court battle—and also in his later life in Salem—a determination to struggle for personal justice in the face of overwhelming odds.

Like most slaves, Holmes was unable to read or write—it was against public policy in Missouri and throughout the South to educate a slave.² Nevertheless, aided by sympathetic attorneys, Holmes mounted a credible case against Ford, who was prominent in Oregon politics. Ford served in the territorial legislature and was appointed the region's chief judge in 1845, although he declined the office. Moreover, Holmes faced the added burden of taking on a slave owner in a farming community known to be sympathetic to slavery, and at a time when Oregon's own position on slavery, while technically outlawed, was still in flux.

To say Oregon came close to becoming a slave state would be an exaggeration. But not a wild one. There were influential leaders who wanted Oregon open to slavery. And there were those like Ford who wanted to, and did, keep slaves.

An early nineteenth century historian, Walter Carleton Woodward, concluded that slavery posed “an actual menace to Oregon” prior to the Civil War. Writing in a 1911 issue of *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Woodward said:

*At this distance it may seem almost inconceivable that there was any basis for such agitation [for slavery]; that there was any danger of Oregon’s (sic) becoming a slave state. Whatever may be the mature conclusions on this point after the lapse of a half century, the fact remains that there was apparently very serious danger at the time.*³

The writer of a 1970 thesis, citing newspaper coverage, was led to remark: “The pro-slavery element was sufficiently vocal that the impression was gained in the territory and throughout the nation that Oregon was about to apply for admission to the Union as a slave state.”⁴

There were probably never more than fifty slaves in Oregon, a number that pales in comparison with Missouri’s total of 114,965 slaves in 1860, and the national total of 3,949,557.⁵ And, in Oregon, slaves had an opportunity to gain their freedom, an opportunity denied them in slave states. Still, many may be surprised to learn that there were slaves in Oregon at all.

Trading in slaves was practiced in the Oregon Country long before the first wagon trains arrived. The earliest slaveholders and slaves were Native Americans. Some tribes captured members of other tribes for slaves, traded slaves among themselves, and, in later years, sold slaves to whites. “Hereditary slavery” was common among tribes around Puget Sound.⁶

A brief article in the *Oregon Journal* newspaper on January 8, 1920, said, “the principal slave market of the West was on the bank of the Willamette River at Oregon City near what is now the foot of Eleventh Street.”

*Here in the ’40s and early ’50s the Klamaths brought Indian slaves for sale, usually children captured in their frequent forays against the Shasta and Rogue Indians. The Klamaths traded these Indian slaves for blankets or other Hudson’s Bay wares owned by the Willamette Valley Indians. Scores of these Indian slaves were purchased from their Indian owners by the white residents of Oregon City. In most cases they were liberated. Occasionally they were adopted and educated.*⁷

I learned of the Holmes family while researching the background of another Missouri slave, known as Reuben Shipley. I had recently discovered in a long-unread family genealogy that I am a shirttail descendant of the man who owned Shipley and brought him to Oregon.⁸ I was less than pleased to learn of this, and sought to know more. I was soon to discover that Reuben Shipley put his own important stamp on race relations in present-day Benton County, where, after receiving his freedom, he owned a farm near the small town of Philomath.

The lives of Reuben Shipley and Robin Holmes would intersect in later years, another of the several compelling stories involving these two former slaves, both unschooled, both of whom signed their names with X's.

The Good Life in Missouri

How the Holmes family became Ford's slaves in the first place is a story in itself. It begins in Howard County, Missouri.

Howard County is part of a central Missouri region that was known for years as "Little Dixie," a name befitting its similarity to the slave-based economies of the Deep South. Established in 1816, the county was named for Benjamin Howard, Missouri's first territorial governor. The Missouri River borders it on the south and west. Howard County had 4,890 slaves in 1850, one-third of its population of 13,969, making it the second largest slave-holding county in the state.¹ Slaves worked primarily in the hemp fields, cutting and crushing the tall, woody plant whose fiber was used for rope and textiles.

As told by Holmes, he and his wife had been owned for a dozen years by a Major Whitman, or Whitmore, a U.S. Army paymaster stationed in Missouri. The Holmeses were both born in Virginia about the year 1810. Polly was a house servant, Robin most likely a field hand.² In 1841, or possibly earlier, their ownership changed. The major had fallen deeply into debt and was unable to pay his creditors. Holmes said Nathaniel Ford, the sheriff of Howard County, seized the Holmeses under what was known as a writ of execution for an unpaid lien. He said Ford sold them at a sheriff's auction in Fayette, the county seat, with the proceeds helping pay the major's debts.³

Holmes said they were purchased by a local merchant—he didn't remember the man's name. But he did remember that Ford directed him to go to the

buyer's home and request a wagon to transport his wife and their children—they then had four—and return them to the new owner's home. However, on arrival, Holmes said the buyer was absent and the man's wife declared she knew nothing about the purchase, and sent them away. Holmes reported back to Ford, who next informed him he had made a separate arrangement to keep Holmes and his family. The Holmeses went to work as Ford's slaves.⁴

Holmes was mistaken on one important point. Ford was not sheriff of Howard County in 1841. The sheriff at that time was Lewis Crigler, who seems to have been a rival of Ford's.⁵ Ford did serve four two-year terms as the elected sheriff from 1828 to 1832 and from 1836 to 1840, when Crigler succeeded him. Crigler would have conducted the sheriff's auction in 1841.

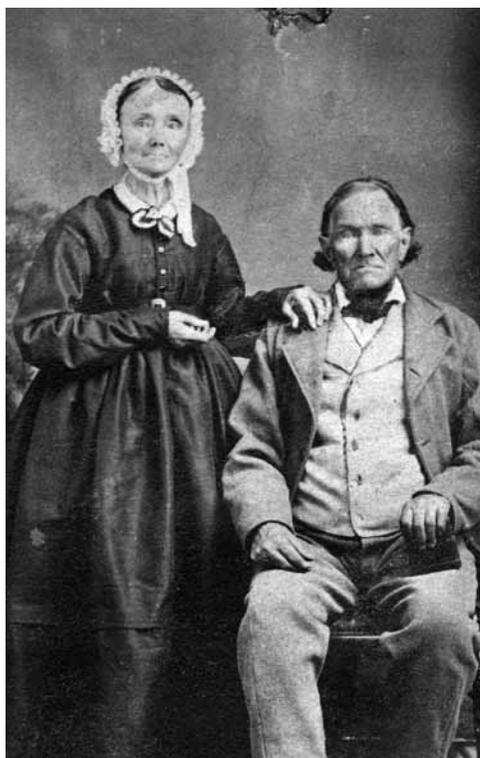
It is possible Crigler awarded Holmes to Ford when the original purchaser backed out. But it is more likely Holmes—or the person who transcribed his recollection of events—mixed up the date, putting down 1841 instead of the more logical year of 1831, when Ford was still sheriff. However, it is curious Ford failed to correct Holmes' version of events when he easily—in court, in Oregon—could have done so.

Holmes would later say that because of the confusion surrounding the outcome of the auction, he couldn't be certain he and his wife were ever legally Ford's slaves, even though Ford claimed them, and, in later years in Oregon, considered trying to return the entire Holmes family to Missouri to be sold back into slavery.



Nathaniel Ford evidently was not an outwardly cruel man—the Holmeses did not complain he beat them, although beatings were commonplace in slave states. One historian of the slave experience wrote of “the helpless feeling” of slave parents on seeing children whipped, unable to intervene, or, the terror of slave children watching their parents being beaten.⁶

Ford was someone with a firm belief in what was right for himself and his family, to the exclusion of the rights of others. He was careless about his debts, insensitive to his slaves, and he once manipulated the outcome of an election to Oregon's territorial legislature to make himself the winner. A grandson, John Thorp Ford, said Ford was of “forceful character” with “black hair and blue eyes, which looked out from under heavy, bushy eyebrows.” He was short and stocky—five-foot-nine, and two hundred pounds.⁷ Photographs of Ford bear out the description. He is seen in one photograph as unsmiling, with unkempt hair and beard, mouth clenched tightly in what might best be described as a



Nathaniel Ford and his wife, Lucinda. The Fords brought six slaves from Missouri to Oregon in 1844 and established a farm near present-day Rickreall in Polk County. Ford was sued by his former slave, Robin Holmes, seeking freedom for his children. (Oregon Historical Society)

sneer. Ford's descendants said he treated his slaves well. Holmes would say, not so well.

More is known about Ford's life in Oregon than his earlier years in Missouri. But it is possible to piece together his background from family histories, newspaper clippings, and court records, of which there are many. During Howard County's boom years in the 1820s, caravans of slave owners arrived daily from the tobacco and hemp-growing areas of Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky, lured by cheap land and fertile soil, much as Missouri emigrants would be lured to Oregon a quarter-century later. Those with wealth and large numbers of slaves—slaves equaled wealth—became gentlemen farmers, with plenty of time to involve themselves in local and state politics. This seemed to be Ford's path as well.

Ford was well known and evidently respected during most of the two decades he lived in Missouri—he was a sheriff, state legislator, and major landholder. However, in the last few years before he departed for Oregon, his reputation seemed to nosedive under a cloud of debt.

Ford was born in Buckingham County, Virginia, in 1795, the son of a soldier in the Revolutionary War. He arrived in Missouri in 1822 and married Lucinda Embree that same year in Fayette. The couple had ten children, eight daughters and two sons, although four children died in infancy or early childhood. Ford would bring his six surviving children, five daughters and one son, with him to Oregon.⁸

Ford had both land and slaves in Missouri. The 1830 Census listed him with one slave, a female. By 1840, he had nine slaves: two adult or adolescent males, three adult or adolescent females, and four children—three girls and a boy.⁹ Over time, he may have had as many as thirteen different slaves, including the Holmeses. He frequently mortgaged his slaves as collateral for loans, and forfeited several, including three of the Holmeses' children. The transactions involving Ford's slaves were typical of many slave owners, who bought, sold, and mortgaged slaves, with little or no regard for their family situations. Some slaveholders tried to keep families together, but others did not, either because it didn't matter to them, or they felt compelled to break up families for financial reasons. Children were sold away from their parents; parents were sold away from one another. Such upheavals in their lives might occur without warning. The complexity and suddenness of these transactions led to the near constant uncertainty that most slaves, including the Holmeses, had about their future. It's perfectly understandable that Robin and Polly Holmes might confuse the dates they were sold or purchased in a particular transaction.

Among Ford's Missouri land holdings were eight hundred and thirty-two acres in Howard County and nearby Chariton County that he owned from 1841 to 1843. Family records say he had two other properties, one of eighteen hundred acres and another of four hundred acres. His Oregon descendants called these properties farms, although in Missouri they were large enough to classify as plantations. Ford most likely grew tobacco and hemp—especially hemp—as these were the major crops in the region's fertile soils. The chief market for hemp was in the cotton-growing regions of the Deep South where hemp rope was needed to wrap bales of cotton. Holmes, Scott, and Ford's other male slaves would mostly likely have helped cut and harvest hemp, as nearly every male slave in the region was involved with hemp at some point. A 1914 study of slavery in Missouri said the hemp culture made slave labor profitable.¹⁰

Ford listed his home in census records as Richmond Township, east of Fayette. Descendants said the Fords divided their time between a farm home and a Fayette town home.

In addition to four terms as the sheriff of Howard County, Ford was elected a state representative in 1832, serving a single term in the Missouri Legislature at Jefferson City. He was Fayette postmaster in 1841 and county clerk in 1842.¹¹ Some of these positions he may have held simultaneously. He also worked as a surveyor, a skill that would serve him well in Oregon.

One oddity is an article in the *Missouri Intelligencer* of Fayette, reporting Ford's death. The one-sentence article on July 14, 1832, said: "Died—recently at New Orleans, Nathaniel Ford, Esq., sheriff of Howard County, Mo."¹² The same newspaper two months later, on September 29, 1832, reported Ford's election to the legislature. The newspaper offered no explanation for its earlier erroneous report. Ford did frequently travel to New Orleans, ferrying produce on a flatboat from his farm, and possibly the farms of others, down the Mississippi River.¹³



Ford was referred to throughout his life in Oregon—less so in Missouri—as "Colonel Ford," a rank said to have been attained during a skirmish in the so-named Mormon War of 1838.¹⁴ There is no record of Ford serving in the U.S. military. A Ford granddaughter, Caroline Burch, recalled in later years the family's prestige and active social life in Missouri. She listed several prominent people whom members of the family knew, including Mary Todd, the future wife of Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Hart Benton, the Missouri senator.

Two Ford daughters, Josephine and Mary Ann, attended the Columbia Female Academy—now Stephens College—in Columbia, Missouri. They were said to have participated in a ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone at Columbia University on July 4, 1840, with their names placed inside the stone. Caroline Burch, who died in 1952, described in detail a ball attended by the two Ford daughters, with Ford as their escort.

That evening grandfather took them to the ball. They were dressed in white dresses, with long tight waists, very short sleeves, long white silk gloves, and blue ribbon sashes . . . white hose, black slippers with long ribbons that wrapped around their ankles and tied in a bow.¹⁵

The Fords' prominence couldn't save them financially, however. During the three years—or thirteen—after Ford claimed the Holmeses as his slaves to settle another man's debts, Ford himself fell into debt from which he could not extricate himself. Robin Holmes would later tell an Oregon court that Ford at the time was "very much embarrassed in his pecuniary circumstances."¹⁶ Court

records in Howard County reveal that Ford was in debt to a James Ferguson for “about twenty four hundred dollars” in 1842. Some of his property was seized to pay his debts, including three parcels totaling four hundred and eighty acres sold at a sheriff’s auction—presumably by Sheriff Lewis Crigler—in Fayette on September 23, 1843.¹⁷

The auctioned lands were properties Ford and his wife, Lucinda, purchased in the New Madrid area in 1827 and 1828. They were described in a court document as “being the place where said Ford now lives on,” although this conflicts with other records that had Ford living near Fayette. Ford sold or mortgaged his remaining property in 1843, as by this time he may have decided his economic situation was hopeless and was eager to try his luck in Oregon. He no doubt was aware of Peter Burnett’s preparations to lead the first major wagon train from Missouri to the Oregon Country that same year.

Nothing underscores the instability and uncertainty in the lives of Robin and Polly Holmes as much as Ford’s transactions in this period. During his final year in Missouri, Ford also sold, mortgaged, or forfeited, several of his slaves to satisfy his debts, including three of the six Holmes children—there were then six—and a slave named Harrison. The three Holmes children taken from their parents were Eliza, born in 1831; Clarisa, born in 1832; and William, also born in 1832. Their names and birth years are listed in the Ford family Bible under “Birth of Blacks.” Harrison is also listed in the Bible as being born on January 10, 1824. The recording of specific birth dates suggest the slaves were born into Ford’s ownership.¹⁸

Ford had used Harrison as collateral on at least two previous occasions, the first to secure a loan of \$600 from Samuel Major on October 10, 1842. He gave Harrison’s age as about twenty-two and affirmed he was “sound and healthy . . . in mind and body.” He reclaimed Harrison on that occasion.¹⁹ The last mention of Ford’s ownership of Harrison and the three Holmes children—Elisa, Clarisa, and William—was in a loan agreement dated May 20, 1843, in which Ford mortgaged Robin and Polly Holmes and five of their children, plus eight hundred and forty acres of land, as collateral for four loans totaling nearly \$1,600, most of it owed to the Fayette Branch Bank of the State of Missouri. At least one of the loans was overdue. In the mortgage document, Ford declared the children were “sound and healthy and slaves for life.”²⁰ Terms of the agreement provided that if Ford repaid the loans, plus interest, his ownership of the slaves and land was to be restored. He managed to regain Robin and Polly Holmes and two of their children—but apparently not Harrison and the other three children. Or if he regained them, he sold them soon after, as there was no further mention of them.²¹

Ford had also mortgaged Scott, another “slave for life,” on June 17, 1843, as collateral for a loan of \$500 from a woman named Polly Davis. Ford had four months to repay, or Scott would be sold at auction. As Ford also took Scott to Oregon, he must have repaid Davis, or walked out on the debt. In the court documents, Ford gave Scott’s age as twenty, and said he does “hereby warrant the said negro boy sound and healthy both in mind and body.”²²

Additionally, Ford borrowed against his personal property, listing as collateral for a package of loans on May 17, 1843: “3 beds and bedding, 3 bedsteds (sic), 2 bureaus, 1 bookcase, 6 rattan chairs, 1 four-year-old mare, 4 cows and calves, 6 head of young cattle, 2 yoke of steers.” It seems likely Ford had no intention of paying off these and other loans, and was, in effect, cashing out his property before departing for Oregon.²³

Ford’s debts—some paid, some unpaid—may explain why in later years he complained that he was poorly regarded in Missouri. In a letter from Oregon to a Missouri acquaintance, James Shirley, in 1852, Ford wrote, “I have long since come to the conclusion that I have no friends in that ‘country’ even amongst my relatives.”²⁴

Ford was not alone in his financial distress. The nation was mired in depression in the 1840s, which reached deep into rural Howard County and the Mississippi Valley. The region depended on sales of farm products for its economic health, and prices had plunged to well below the cost of production. Wheat was selling for twenty-five cents a bushel, half of what was required for a profit. Hog prices fell from four dollars and twenty cents per hundredweight to under a dollar.²⁵



Slaveholding in Missouri was on a smaller scale than in the slave states of the Deep South. There were few large plantations. The average number of slaves held by an individual slaveholder in Howard County in 1850 was under seven.²⁶ Many households employed a single slave as a house servant and a few slaves to assist with farm work.²⁷

A 2010 study challenged the notion, popular in Missouri, that slavery in Missouri was somehow less onerous than in other slave states. The author wrote that this misconception grew out of the prevalence of smaller slaveholdings. However, there was little, if any, difference in how a slave was treated. “Missouri was just as cruel and exploitative as anywhere in the South.”²⁸

Howard County—and Missouri generally—played a major role in the interstate slave trade, supplying slaves for plantations in the Deep South. The price for a healthy male slave in the 1860s averaged about \$1,300, and for



Renovated slave quarters on the Redstone plantation near Roanoke in Howard County, Missouri. It was owned by agriculturalist and Baptist Minister Younger R. Pitts. Built in the 1830s the structure is about 18 by 43 feet and served as a summer kitchen and housing for some of the plantation slaves. (Courtesy of Gary Fuenfhausen)



Renovated slave quarters belonging to Abiel Leonard at the Oakwood plantation near Fayette, Missouri. Built about 1830, the cabin measures about 16 by 17 feet. Leonard, an attorney, owned 60,000 acres and fifteen slaves and three slave houses. He was the Missouri State Supreme Court Justice prior to the Civil War, but was removed during the war. (Courtesy of Gary Fuenfhausen)

a female, \$1,000.²⁹ A slave in the hemp fields was expected to “break”—or thrash—at least one hundred pounds of hemp a day, after which he typically was paid an additional penny for every pound over that amount. The process separated the fibers—used for rope—from the woody stems.

Whipping was not an uncommon punishment for slaves who failed to produce the minimum. Typical, apparently, was this recollection by a Lafayette County resident of a slave’s work:

*I can remember how twenty or thirty negroes would work in line cutting hemp with sickles. It was then left to rot til January. Then it was broken and the pith removed by means of a heavy crusher which the slave swung up and down. He often received the lash if not breaking his one hundred pounds.*³⁰

Howard County produced 904 tons of hemp in 1850, and 655 tons in 1860, after which production dropped precipitously because of the Civil War and the loss of slave labor.³¹ Howard County today remains rural, and, as with many other rural counties nationwide, it has lost residents, with a population of 10,204 in 2011, down from 17,233 in 1870.³² African Americans constituted less than 4 percent of the total, down from one-third in 1850. Fayette, still the county seat, is now a college town, home to Central Methodist University, with an enrollment of nearly twenty-five hundred students. Hemp and tobacco are no longer major crops. Without slaves, there was little profit left in hemp. The last tobacco warehouse closed in the mid-1990s.

Slave quarters are still found throughout central Missouri. Some are in ruins; others have been renovated by their owners. They are curiosities, attractions for tourists, a reminder of what was, and should never be again.

The Lure of Oregon

Beginning in the 1840s, Oregon became a magnet for many distressed Missourians. Interest was piqued partly by news that Congress was giving serious consideration to a bill offering free land in the Oregon Country to settlers willing to farm it. The bill was approved by the Senate in 1843, although it wouldn’t be enacted into law until 1850. Hundreds of families

from Missouri and elsewhere prepared to emigrate, despite knowing little about their destination, or the two thousand-mile ordeal required to get there. Some of the stories circulating about Oregon were far too incredible to be believed. An Iowa pioneer who settled in Benton County recalled years later one of the more impossible exaggerations:

[H]earing of the great wealth of Oregon, west of the Rockies, and especially the Willamette River which wended its way to the great Pacific, and the great Willamette Valley beyond the Cascades, where it was believed only necessary to sow a crop of wheat once in ten years, and the cattle were so fat that tallow candles actually grew out of the ends of their horns.¹

Wrote the nineteenth century historians Hubert Bancroft and Frances Fuller Victor in 1886, “Many . . . imagined that all they had to do after reaching [the] Snake River was to embark upon its waters and float down to the mouth of the Columbia.”² But even though emigrants in the early wagon trains would confront perils they were not told to expect and could not have imagined, the remarkable outcome was that nearly all of them made it. They survived to build a prosperous new society, one that worked very well for the new white population, but not so well for minorities or the native people they displaced.

The first of the major emigrant wagon trains set out from Independence, Missouri, on May 21, 1843—one hundred and twenty wagons and nearly nine hundred people, including at least a few slaves.³ The emigrants were headed for an unknown region with few non-Native American inhabitants. One estimate put the “American population” of the Oregon Country at slightly less than two hundred and fifty.⁴ Another estimate attributed to Catholic missionaries put the white population in 1841 at two hundred and ten—of whom one hundred and forty were Americans and sixty were Canadians.⁵ Most of the Canadians were in the employ of the Hudson’s Bay Company.

The arrival of the emigrants in the fall of 1843 quadrupled the Euro-American population.⁶ Three more wagon trains would leave the following year, and more in the years after that. Nearly fifty-three thousand emigrants traveled to the Oregon Country along the Oregon Trail from 1840 to 1861. Of these, more than ten thousand emigrated during the five years from 1843 to 1849; most were farm families from the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys.⁷



The settlers arriving from Missouri in the 1843 wagons would provide leadership in the American West for decades to come. They would rise to

influence not just in the Oregon Country, which embraced the entire Pacific Northwest, but also in California, then still a province of Mexico. They would become governors, senators, legislators, and judges. They would frame the laws and constitutions of the region as it organized into provisional, territorial, and, finally, statehood status. They would decide, often after harsh and appallingly ugly debate, the region's policies toward slavery, African Americans, and other minorities. By their very presence, they would seal the United States' claim to the region.

Among the 1843 emigrants were two men who would play dominant roles virtually from the day they arrived. They were Jesse Applegate, thirty-two, a farmer from St. Clair County, Missouri, and Peter Burnett, thirty-five, a storekeeper and lawyer in the Missouri River port of Weston in Platte County.

Estimated immigration on the Oregon Trail, 1840-1860

Year	to Oregon	to California
1840	13	0
1841	24	34
1842	125	0
1843	875	38
1844	1,475	53
1845	2,500	260
1846	1,200	1,500
1847	4,000	450
1848	1,300	400
1849	450	25,000
1850	6,000	44,000
1851	3,600	1,100
1852	10,000	50,000
1853	7,500	20,000
1854	6,000	12,000
1855	500	1,500
1856	1,000	8,000
1857	1,500	4,000
1858	1,500	6,000
1859	2,000	17,000
1860	1,500	9,000
Totals	53,062	200,335

Source: John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860*

Burnett was one of the defense attorneys in the 1839 Missouri treason case against Mormon leader Joseph Smith.⁸ He would serve in Oregon's provisional legislature and as the region's first judge, and, after moving to California in search of gold, would be elected that state's first governor in 1849.⁹ He would also have an outsized, and negative, influence on racial policies in both Oregon and California.

Applegate would also serve in Oregon's provisional legislature, as well as the territorial legislature and the 1857 Constitutional Convention. Among other achievements, he would help establish a new trail into Oregon known as the Applegate Trail. Another settler in this first group was James Nesmith from New Hampshire, who would be one of Oregon's first U.S. senators.

The influence of Burnett and Applegate would extend well beyond politics. John Minto, who traveled to Oregon in 1844, credited Burnett with organizing the emigration of new settlers through a series of speeches he gave across Missouri

in 1842.¹⁰ Of Applegate, Minto would write he was “the natural leader upon the highest plane of thought for the future of Oregon as an American community.”¹¹

The opportunity for free land drew Burnett, who was elected captain of the wagon train. Like many other emigrants, Burnett was, by his own admission, deeply in debt. He calculated that if the proposed land law was approved, he might be able to pay off his Missouri debts.¹² When the law, known as the Donation Land Act, was eventually approved for Oregon in 1850—it allowed six hundred and forty acres for a married couple if they were among the first settlers, with half in the wife’s name. It was an enormous amount of free land, a full square mile. Previously, settlers were allowed one hundred and sixty acres of public land under the Preemption Act of 1841.¹³

Applegate wrote more generally of what led people to leave homes and possessions behind and figuratively roll the dice for a new opportunity:

*This state of things [the depression] created much discontent and restlessness among a people who had for many generations been nomadic, and had been taught by the example of their ancestors to see a home in ‘new country’ as a sure way of bettering their condition.*¹⁴

In addition to their individual reasons for journeying to an unknown land, emigrants were influenced by the promotional publicity coming from zealous enthusiasts and other boosters of emigration. So-called emigrating societies for Oregon were organized throughout the country.

Once underway, Burnett was the leader of his wagon train for only a short time, although it is still known by his name. Burnett, always impatient, resigned after just ten days, blaming “ten thousand little vexations.” Among them, he complained: “At one time an ox would be missing, at another time a mule, and then a struggle for the best encampment, and for a supply of wood and water; and, in these struggles, the worst traits of human nature were displayed, and there was no remedy but patient endurance.”¹⁵ A persistent complaint was that the wagon train was slowed by the livestock of some emigrants.¹⁶

Jesse Applegate and William Martin afterward shared the leadership, with Applegate taking charge of the slower half of the wagon train bringing the settlers’ livestock, which he called “the cow column.” Jesse and his two brothers, Lindsay and Charles, and another settler, Daniel Waldo, together set out with more than a thousand head of cattle.¹⁷ According to John Minto, the Applegate brothers planned to go into the cattle business in Oregon, and were joined by Waldo, a forty-three-year-old neighbor. Waldo and Jesse Applegate had been partners in a St. Louis sawmill.¹⁸ The Applegates would lose half their

cattle during the journey, with the biggest loss at Fort Walla Walla where they left the herd for the winter.¹⁹



The Missouri influence in the development of Oregon cannot be overstated. By 1850, one-quarter of Oregon's population, or 2,291 people, were from Missouri, more than from any other state.²⁰ Two Missouri senators, Lewis Linn and Thomas Hart Benton, played leading roles in promoting settlement of the Oregon Country to support America's claim to the region.

Senator Linn proposed the donation land bill that eventually would be enacted. Senator Benton, in strong support, argued that "nobody will go three thousand miles to settle a new country unless he gets land by it."²¹ Oregon's Linn and Benton counties are named for the two senators, neither of whom apparently ever visited Oregon. Linn also introduced a bill in the Senate in 1844 calling on the United States "to occupy and create a territorial government" in Oregon. It was defeated, but not without consequences. Disappointment over the bill's defeat was especially acute in the Mississippi Valley, prompting even more emigrants to head West, intent on settling the Oregon Country for the United States.²² As many as a thousand new settlers would leave from Missouri in 1845.



The settlers' wagon journey over the two thousand miles from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon, across lands they had never seen, posed a daunting prospect, especially for families with children. While most made it, lives were lost. Burnett would write years later that the wagon train started with two hundred and ninety three men over age sixteen. Of these, two hundred and sixty-seven made it to Oregon, six died on the way, five turned back, and fifteen continued on to California.²³

One tragedy struck the extended Applegate family. Two of their children drowned on November 6, 1843, when a boat capsized in the Columbia River rapids above The Dalles—probably at or near Celilo Falls.²⁴ One of Lindsay's sons, also named Jesse, witnessed the tragedy from a second boat in which he rode with the Applegate fathers, their wives, and a Native American guide. The fathers were at the oars. The doomed boat was across the river. Jesse, just age seven, recalled in later years the terror and helplessness on the faces of the two fathers as they watched the boat begin to founder, with their children aboard.

This boat now near the south shore, it would seem, should have followed our boat as the pilot was with us, and this was a dangerous part of the

river. But there was little time to consider mistakes, or to be troubled about what might be the consequences, for presently there was a wail of anguish, a shriek, and a scene of confusion in one boat that no language can describe. The boat we were watching disappeared and we saw the men and boys struggling in the water. Father and Uncle Jesse, seeing their children drowning, were seized with frenzy, and dropping their oars spring up from their seats and were about to leap from the boat to make a desperate attempt to swim to them, when Mother and Aunt Cynthia, in voices that were distinctly heard above the roar of the rushing waters, by commands and entreaties brought them to a realization of our own perilous situation, and the madness of an attempt to reach the other side of the river by swimming. . . . The men returned to the oars just in time to avoid, by great exertion, a rock against which the current dashed with such fury that the foam and froth upon its apex was as white as milk.²⁵

Those lost were nine-year-old Warren Applegate, one of Jesse's sons, and Edward Applegate, also nine, Lindsay's son. Also drowned was seventy-year-old Alexander "Mac" McClellan, who was steering the raft. Another son of Lindsay's, eleven-year-old Elisha, swam to safety. A man identified as William Duke also survived.²⁶ The Applegates learned later that the boat had foundered in a whirlpool. The bodies of the boys were not recovered. The tragedy haunted the Applegate brothers for years, and, in 1846, led them to mount an expedition to search for a safer trail into Oregon, a search that would also involve Nathaniel Ford.

It wasn't the only loss in the Columbia River that day. The night of the tragedy, the Burnett party lost another child near The Dalles, said to be an African American girl about age five. Recalled young Applegate:

During the late evening, a man from Peter Burnett's camp came to ours and said that a little Negro girl was lost. She had been sent to the river where the boats were to get a bucket of water. The storm had continued and the boats on the beach were wildly rocked and tossed by the waves. Some thought the girl had entered one of the boats to dip up the water, and had been thrown into the river and was never found.²⁷

In a separate accident, another of the Applegate children, Lisbon, suffered serious injuries from which he would never fully recover. Lisbon was the son of Charles, the third Applegate brother. The accident occurred when an emigrant named George Beale lost control of his wagon in which Lisbon was riding. In 1865, Beale would be convicted with a second man of murdering another member of the wagon train, Daniel Delaney Sr.²⁸

Several slaves came with their owners. While young Applegate didn't mention the name of the girl who drowned, she possibly was a slave girl belonging to one of the settlers. A recollection by another member of the Burnett party, Nineveh Ford, said the victim was a slave woman, who was a "servant" of Burnett's wife, or of a relative.²⁹ Given Burnett's hostility toward slavery, this might seem improbable. However, owning a slave to help around the house may well have been perfectly acceptable to Burnett—his objections to slavery were economic, not moral.

There has long been published speculation that Daniel Waldo brought several slaves, including a black slave woman and her daughter, America Waldo, of whom he was said to be the father. America became America Bogle when she married a free black, Richard A. Bogle, in 1863. A Bogle family spokeswoman and descendant of America, Renita Bogle-Byrd of Decatur, Georgia, told the author that the Bogle "family tradition" is that Daniel Waldo



Missouri-born America Waldo Bogle, third from right, was brought to Oregon as a small child in the mid 1840s along with her mother, both believed to be slaves to the Waldo family. America was raised near Salem by Daniel Waldo, thought for many years to be her father. Recent research points to Daniel's brother, Joseph Waldo, as her father. She married Richard Bogle, a free black from Jamaica, in 1863. The couple is seen with five of their eight children about 1884. (Oregon Historical Society)

was America's father.³⁰ However, a descendant of Daniel Waldo disputes this version of events. Brian Waldo Johnson of Monmouth, Oregon, said America's date of birth is listed on her headstone, and in census records, as June 1844, more than a year after Daniel Waldo left Missouri, so he could not have been the father. He said Daniel's brother, Joseph Waldo, who emigrated in 1846 and apparently did bring slaves, was the more likely candidate to be her father.³¹

There was at least one identified slave in the party: a woman named Rachel Belden, the property of Daniel Delaney Sr., a former plantation owner from Tennessee.³² Accounts of Delaney's slaves differ. One said he sold all his slaves before leaving Tennessee; another said he brought "a few slaves" to Oregon and later sold them. Delaney settled on a farm at Turner, near Salem. John Minto, who knew Delaney, thought him lazy, spending his time hunting and reading his Bible while his three sons and his slave did the farm work. Added Minto, "He seemed to read his Bible chiefly to find in it support for his dominion over the soul and body of his female slave."³³

Delaney was shot and killed in 1865 during a robbery at his home. The killers fled with \$1,400. The crime was witnessed by one of Rachel Belden's children, seven-year-old Jack, or Jackson, hiding in a woodpile. Even though Oregon's 1857 constitution prohibited blacks from testifying against whites, the boy nevertheless was allowed to testify and helped convict the two accused killers, George Beale and George Baker, a Salem tavern owner. They were hanged May 17, 1865.³⁴ Beale had traveled to Oregon with the Burnett wagon train in 1843. Rachel was said to have witnessed the hanging.



There were reasons other than the economic difficulties for risking the long journey to Oregon. These included the spirit of adventure, patriotism, the goal of a healthier climate, and, important to some, escape from the worsening conflicts engendered by slavery. Settlers from Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Arkansas, all slave states, were the majority of the early pioneers in Oregon. Most were not slaveholders, and many wished to leave behind the slave-based economies. Many also didn't want to live among blacks. They—in the words of one historian—wished "to rid themselves of the blight that broods over the land where involuntary servitude prevails."³⁵

One emigrant who sought to leave slavery behind was Wilson Morrison, a farmer at St. Joseph, Missouri, who came to Oregon with a wagon train headed by Cornelius Gilliam in 1844. Minto, who worked for Morrison, quoted him as saying:

*Unless a man keeps niggers (and I won't) he has no even chance; he cannot compete with the man who does. There is Dick Owens my neighbor, he has a few field hands, and a few house niggers. They raise and make all that the family and themselves eat and wear, and some hemp and tobacco besides. If markets are good, Dick will sell; if not, he can hold over, while I am compelled to sell all I can make every year in order to make ends meet. I'm going to Oregon, where there'll be no slaves, and we'll all start even.*³⁶

However, opposition to slavery didn't mean the welcome mat was out for blacks in Oregon. It wasn't. Hostility toward slavery was nearly equally matched by hostility toward blacks, accounting for Oregon's long flirtation with exclusion laws. And not all the emigrants opposed slavery. Nathaniel Ford certainly didn't.



The issue of slavery—where it would be legal; where it would not—once again had a firm grip on the nation's throat. The patchwork of decades of past compromises was unraveling. These compromises included the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which established the Ohio River as the boundary between free and slave territory in the territories east of the Mississippi River—territories south of the Ohio could become slave states, those to the north, could not.³⁷ The Northwest Ordinance was followed in 1820 by the Missouri Compromise, which banned slavery north of the thirty-sixth parallel for most lands acquired as part of the Louisiana Purchase. The exception was Missouri, where slavery was allowed.

As settlers expanded the white man's reach into the Midwest, West, and Southwest, Congress and the courts struggled with the increasingly difficult challenge of balancing anti-slave and pro-slave interests. A new Fugitive Slave Act would be passed as part of the Compromise of 1850, with draconian enforcement provisions. It required so little proof that a free African American might be entrapped in a free state and claimed by a bogus owner in a slave state.³⁸ The Compromise of 1850, which also cleared the way for California statehood, was a consequence of the war with Mexico, from 1846 to 1848, which gained the United States an additional five hundred thousand square miles of territory in the West and Southwest. The enormous new territory embroiled Congress in yet another divisive debate over how and where to extend, or not extend, slavery.

Next would come the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, effectively repealing the Missouri Compromise and potentially opening more of the West to

slavery, bringing near-civil war to Kansas. That act would be followed by the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision of 1857—denying constitutional protections and citizenship to all African Americans, both free and slaves, and their descendants, and holding that Congress lacked the authority to prohibit slavery in the territories.³⁹

Each of these measures and compromises constituted another tear in the fabric of the Union that would culminate in Civil War in 1861. Whether they wanted it or not—and most didn't—the controversy over slavery traveled with the emigrants on their westward journey.

On the Trail

Nathaniel Ford's fifty-four wagons set out from Independence, Missouri, on May 14, 1844. It was the second, or third, of the major emigrant trains to strike out across the prairie, headed for Oregon. Departing wagon trains were a national event, much like astronauts headed for the moon. Newspapers throughout the country ran accounts of Ford's progress. In an article under the headline "The Oregon Expedition," the *Maine Cultivator* told its readers in nearly breathless prose on July 8, 1844, that:

*the Oregon emigrants started from their place of general rendezvous at the 'Lone Elm,' on the 14th, and that although they had been gone upward of two weeks, they had, in consequence of the high waters, only travelled almost one hundred miles. . . . There are several small parties on the route, which have not yet reached Col. Ford's company.*¹

In Ford's wagon train were fifty-five married couples, one hundred sixty-eight children, and eighty single men, a total of three hundred and fifty-eight pioneers. They brought with them five hundred head of cattle, sixty horses, and twenty-eight mules.² No separate breakdown was given for slaves, although there were at least seven. Ford brought six. There was also a woman slave belonging to William M. Case, who settled in Marion County.³

The group hired as its guide, Moses "Black" Harris, an experienced mountain man, said by some to be African American, by others to be white. He was believed to have been born in Union County, South Carolina, but no birth

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When they were brought to Oregon in 1844, Missouri slaves Robin and Polly Holmes and their children were promised freedom in exchange for helping develop their owner's Willamette Valley farm. However, slaveholder Nathaniel Ford, an influential settler and legislator, kept them in bondage until 1850, even then refusing to free their children. Holmes took his former master to court and, in the face of enormous odds, won the case in 1853.

In *Breaking Chains*, R. Gregory Nokes tells the story of the only slavery case ever adjudicated in Oregon courts—Holmes v. Ford. Drawing on the court record of this landmark case, Nokes offers an intimate account of the relationship between a slave and his master from the slave's point of view. He also explores the experiences of other slaves in early Oregon, examining attitudes toward race and revealing contradictions in the state's history. Oregon was the only free state admitted to the union with a voter-approved constitutional clause banning African Americans and, despite the prohibition against slavery, many in Oregon tolerated it, and supported politicians who were pro-slavery, including Oregon's first territorial governor.

Told against the background of the national controversy over slavery, *Breaking Chains* sheds light on a somber part of Pacific Northwest history, bringing the story of slavery in Oregon to a broader audience.



R. GREGORY NOKES is the author of *Massacred for Gold: The Chinese in Hells Canyon*, which *The Oregonian* named as one of the Top Ten Northwest Books of 2009. He travelled the world as a reporter and editor for the Associated Press and *The Oregonian*. He is a graduate of Willamette University and attended Harvard University as a Nieman Fellow. He and his wife, Candise, live in West Linn, Oregon. www.gregnokes.com

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