



African Americans in Ohio

Learn about the work, leisure, daily life and contributions of African Americans in Ohio in a broad range of fields and how they have affected our state and nation.

Background

In 1787, Congress enacted the Northwest Ordinance establishing a government for the Northwest Territory. While the black population was small—there were 337 blacks in the Northwest Territory in 1800—the 1802 Constitutional Convention made clear that the first state created in the Territory would honor the Northwest Ordinance pledge that slavery would not exist northwest of the Ohio River: "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory but any slave escaping into the territory may be lawfully reclaimed."

Beginning in 1803, a series of laws known as the "Black Laws" was enacted in Ohio, in part to slow black migration. Upon entering the state, any black person was required to post bond for \$500 and file evidence of free status. African Americans were not permitted to work unless they carried documentation of their free status with them. While slavery was not legal, the rights of blacks were nonetheless severely limited; suffrage was extended only to white male inhabitants and blacks were denied other political rights including the right to serve on a jury, to serve in the militia, or to testify against whites.

African Americans were also denied the opportunity to send their children to public schools, although higher education saw expansion in admission policies. In Cincinnati, Lane Seminary students conducted anti-slavery meetings and performed charitable work in the black community. In 1833, fifty-three students took voluntary dismissal rather than stop their work in the black community. About thirty of those went on to enroll at Oberlin College, which in 1835 became the first college in the nation to admit black students.

The black population was growing steadily during this time. In 1830, the number of African Americans in Ohio reached 9,586. Local chapters of the American Antislavery Society and its affiliate, the Ohio Antislavery Society (established 1835), grew, as did anti-antislavery societies in various parts of the state. By the late 1830s, there were more than 200 antislavery organizations in Ohio. At the same time, the American Colonization Society started to raise funds to send blacks "Back to Africa." In 1849, Ohio's "Black Laws" were partially repealed, meaning that African Americans were no longer required to post bond or register freedom papers. While they were still denied the right to vote, they could testify in court.

Abolition, Anti-Slavery Movements, and the Rise of the Sectional Controversy

Northerners had generally ignored the federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 when aiding escaping slaves. Aid to fugitive slaves had occurred as early as 1815 and became more organized over the years. The most well-known example is the Underground Railroad. Fugitive slaves moved along established routes through Ohio from one "station" to another. One Quaker conductor, Levi Coffin, claimed to have assisted hundreds of fugitive slaves.



Reverend John Rankin, another conductor on the route, lived in Ripley on the Ohio River, and kept a lantern in the window showing the path to Ohio.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 made it a federal offense to interfere in the capture and return of fugitive slaves. The law required citizens to assist in capturing escapees when called upon. Captured blacks were denied jury trials and were not permitted to testify on their own behalf. Abolitionists considered this a "Kidnap Law." Around this time, Harriet Beecher Stowe contributed to the slavery debate with the publication of her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which vividly portrayed the lives of slaves in this period. Stowe was the daughter of Lyman Beecher, a white Cincinnati preacher who also served as head of Lane Seminary.

As the 19th century progressed, slavery became an increasingly divisive issue, and abolitionists were active throughout the state. Numerous intense incidents brought forth vocal advocates on both sides of the issue. One of the most famous incidents was the Oberlin-Wellington Rescuer Case. In 1858, John Price, a fugitive slave, was seized in Oberlin, but was quickly moved to Wellington, where support for the law was stronger. Abolitionist sentiment in Oberlin was high, and the citizens were outraged at the events. Several citizens traveled to Wellington and worked with local people there to free Price. Thirty-seven Oberlin and Wellington citizens were later indicted by a federal grand jury for violating the fugitive slave law. Two of these individuals—Simeon Bushnell and Charles Langston—were later tried, found guilty, and jailed. Controversy ensued over whether the law was constitutional or should be permitted in Ohio. Eventually the Ohio Supreme Court, by a narrow margin, ruled the fugitive slave law to be constitutional. Both Bushnell and Langston served their short sentences, but were considered martyrs for the antislavery cause.

The Civil War and Reconstruction

The Civil War broke out in 1861. When Confederate General John Hunt Morgan laid plans to attack Cincinnati in 1862, the Black Brigade of Cincinnati, the first African American unit to be utilized for military purposes in the North, was formed. In anticipation of the attack, seventeen companies of African American residents were conscripted to construct military roads, dig rifle pits, fell trees, and construct forts and magazines. For the next three weeks, the Black Brigade labored to complete the defenses, and was mustered-out on September 20. Although many of the men expressed desire to stay and fight as organized companies, they were denied.

Following the 1863 federal Conscription Act, Ohio started to enroll blacks in volunteer units. African American soldiers served under white officers and received half the pay of white volunteers. On the eve of the Civil War, blacks made up two percent of the Ohio population, or 36,700 people. Ultimately, 5,000 Ohio blacks served in state or federal units during the conflict.

The 27th U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment, recruited by John Mercer Langston with the authorization of Governor David Todd, was organized into service on January 16, 1864, at Camp Delaware, Ohio. From there, the regiment was ordered to Annapolis, Maryland, to serve with the Army of the Potomac in Virginia and North Carolina, until they were mustered out on September 21, 1865.



The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 freed African Americans in rebel states, and after the Civil War, the 13th Amendment emancipated all U.S. slaves wherever they were. By 1870, African American men had the right to vote. But while legislation was changing, discrimination in theaters, restaurants, and public transportation continued. Beginning just before the turn of the 20th century, black Republicans served regularly in the Ohio General Assembly, where they supported anti-lynching legislation and helped to defeat a bill that would have prohibited "mixed" marriages. Harry Smith, a black legislator and newspaper publisher, was instrumental in the 1896 anti-lynching law known as the Smith Act. That same year, Smith also introduced the Ohio Civil Rights Law, outlawing racial discrimination in public places.

Civil Rights Movement

Despite the passage of the 13th and 14th Amendments in the 19th century, African Americans continued to receive unequal and often unfair treatment. By 1950, blacks represented six percent of Ohio's population. In 1954, the U. S. Supreme Court, in the case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education in Topeka*, ruled "separate but equal" facilities unconstitutional. Following this landmark decision, African Americans began to enter all-white schools and brought the segregation issue into the public eye.

The social inequalities prevalent in the South could also be found in the North. Although the Ohio Accommodations Law of 1884 banned discrimination on the basis of race, segregation was still practiced in Ohio through the 1950s at skating rinks, pools, hotels, and restaurants. Ohio sought to remove such segregations by creating the Ohio Civil Rights Commission in 1959. Its purpose was to monitor and enforce the law preventing discrimination in employment.

Another threat to racial equality was the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan, which spread north from the South during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, aimed to preserve American culture as its leaders believed it should be. It enjoyed some support in Ohio, especially during the 1920s, in major cities including Dayton, Columbus, Springfield and Akron. In fact, Akron voters elected Klan members to serve as mayor, sheriff, county commissioners, and school board members.

The first Ohio Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in Cleveland in 1912. Established in 1909 by W. E. B. DuBois, Ida Wells-Barnett, Mary White Ovington and other activists, the organization is dedicated to securing equality for African Americans. A century later, chapters of the NAACP exist in dozens of other cities around the state.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to combat discrimination in employment by race, religion, national origin and gender. The act also established a national policy prohibiting racial segregation and discrimination. In the years that followed, violence erupted across the country. On the east side of Cleveland in 1966, four African Americans were killed and many others injured during several days of rioting. Blocks of houses and commercial buildings were



levelled by fires. A board created to investigate argued that the riots occurred because of the poor social conditions found to be present in the neighborhood.

Despite such violence, the 1964 Civil Rights Act made much progress. In 1967, Carl B. Stokes (1927-1996) became the first African American to govern a major city in the United States when he was elected mayor of Cleveland. Stokes remained in office until 1971. Other African Americans were also elected to political positions; Louis Stokes, Carl's brother, was elected to the U. S. House of Representatives.

Beginning in the 1970s, legal action focused on issues of race in Ohio's major urban school districts. *Brown vs. the Board of Education in Topeka* paved the way for desegregation lawsuits filed in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton and Lorain. Mandatory cross-town busing was implemented to equalize racial balances in the public schools, and districts remained under federal court supervision for between 10 and 26 years. Dayton was the last city to be released from the desegregation order, in 2002.

African Americans in the Military

For nearly a century, from 1869 until 1951, the United States military was segregated by race. Black men were officially allowed to join the armed forces for the first time during the Civil War. Beginning with World War II, African American women could join the Women's Army Corps or the Navy WAVES, although there were restrictions on their numbers. President Harry Truman signed an executive order in 1948 outlawing segregation, but until 1951 (partway through the Korean War), they were organized into all-black units, generally serving under white officers. The United States Military Academy at West Point accepted African American cadets for the first time in 1870, and Ohioan Charles Young (1864-1922) was the school's third black graduate. Today, the proportion of African Americans in military service exceeds their representation in the general population.

Notable African Americans

Benjamin W. Arnett (1836-1906) was born in Brownsville, Pennsylvania. A teacher and bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Arnett moved to Ohio in 1867. He served as a pastor and teacher at churches in Cincinnati, Toledo, Urbana and Columbus. In 1886, as Republican representative from Greene County in the Ohio General Assembly, Arnett introduced legislation to repeal the state's "Black Laws," which limited the freedom and rights of its African American residents. Arnett was particularly concerned that state law did not ensure that black children had the same educational opportunities as white children. In 1887, statutes regarding education were changed; the state was thereafter required to provide equal opportunities to all children regardless of race.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) was born in Cleveland, and is recognized as a major innovator in the tradition of African American fiction. Chesnutt first gained public recognition with the publication of "The Goophered Grapevine," a story that showed intimate knowledge of African American culture in the South. When the story was published in the August 1887 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, it was the first short story by an African American in the magazine. His second novel, *The Marrow of Truth* (1901), was based on the Wilmington, North Carolina,



race riots of 1898. In 1928 the NAACP awarded Chesnut the Spingarn Medal for pioneering literary work.

Rita Dove (b. 1952) of Akron was the daughter of Ray Dove, the first black research chemist who, in the 1950s, broke the race barrier in the tire industry. In 1970, Rita was invited to the White House as a Presidential Scholar, one of the one hundred most outstanding high school graduates in the United States that year, before attending Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. In 1993, Dove was appointed United States Poet Laureate, making her the youngest person—and the first African-American—to receive the highest official honor in American letters.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was born in Dayton to ex-slaves. Dunbar is acknowledged as the first significant African American poet in the United States. William Dean Howells wrote that he was "struck by the beauty of the verse" and mentioned Dunbar in *Harper's Weekly*. Dunbar's ambition was to "interpret my own people through song and story, and to prove to them that after all we are more human than African." His first book of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*, was published in 1893. It was followed by *Lyrics of a Lowly Life*, and *Majors and Minors*, as well as ten other books of poetry, four books of short stories, five novels and a play. Dunbar died of tuberculosis on February 9, 1906.

Robert S. Duncanson (1821-1871) was born to free black parents in upstate New York. The Duncanson family moved to Canada for a time, but Robert Duncanson came to Cincinnati at the age of 19 and began to exhibit his artwork. Cincinnati was becoming a major western outpost for landscape painting, and in 1861 the *Cincinnati Gazette* declared Duncanson "the best landscape painter in the west." Duncanson's still-lives and landscapes earned him generous patronage from many prominent Cincinnatians, including Nicholas Longworth, who commissioned a series of twelve panels for his mansion. Sponsored by anti-slavery groups, Duncanson traveled widely in Canada and Europe during the 1860s, exhibiting and selling his paintings to patrons including the king of Sweden.

Wayne Embry (b. 1937) was born in Springfield, Ohio. In 1954 he began his studies at Miami University of Ohio, where he led the university basketball team in points scored in 1957 and 1958 and served as the team captain. He was the fourth player in Miami's history to have his jersey (#23) retired. In 1971, Embry became general manager of the Milwaukee Bucks, making him the first African American general manager in the NBA. He left the Bucks in 1979 and became executive vice president and general manager of the Cleveland Cavaliers from 1985 to 2000. He was enshrined in the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1999.

Garrett Augustus Morgan (1877-1963) was born in Paris, Kentucky, moved to Cincinnati as a teenager, then moved to Cleveland in 1895. Morgan developed a traffic signal to improve road safety. The Morgan traffic signal is a T-shaped pole that has three positions: stop, go, and all-directional stop (halting traffic to allow for pedestrian crossing). This style of traffic light was used all over the United States until it was replaced by the red, yellow, and green lights. He received a patent for his invention on November 20, 1923. Morgan also invented the smoke inhalator; a special adaptation of the smoke inhalator was the gas mask, which was used in World War I.



Toni Morrison (b. 1931) was born Chloe Wofford in Lorain, Ohio. She graduated with honors from Lorain High School and earned a bachelor's degree in English at Howard University. It was during her time at Howard University that she changed her name to Toni. In 1955, she received her master's degree in English from Cornell University, and in 1970, her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published. Her fifth novel, *Beloved*, received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988. Morrison received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993.

Jesse Owens (1913-1980) was born James Cleveland Owens in a small Alabama town, and began his athletic career when he was invited to join the track team in high school. Owens started college at the Ohio State University in 1933. On May 25, 1935, he set three world records in a span of seventy minutes in Ann Arbor, Michigan, breaking records in the broad jump, 220-yard dash, 220-yard low hurdles, and tying the 100-yard dash record. In 1936, Owens competed in the Olympic Games held in Nazi Germany where he set three Olympic records and won gold medals in the 100-meter dash, the 200-meter dash, the broad jump, and the 400-meter relay. Owens was the first American in the history of Olympic track and field to win four gold medals in a single Olympics.

Daniel A. Payne (1811-1893) was born in Charleston, South Carolina, to free parents of mixed black, white and American Indian ancestry. In 1835, he moved north to enroll in seminary. He was licensed to preach in 1837 and ordained in 1839. Although affiliated with several denominations, Payne eventually settled on the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which ordained him bishop in 1852. In his ministry, Payne focused on education as the key to empowerment. In 1863, he was able to raise enough money to purchase Wilberforce University on behalf of the A.M.E. Church. He became the first African American president of Wilberforce University, the first university to be owned and run by African Americans. Between 1863 and 1876, Payne provided leadership as president of the university, which became a respected leader in educating African Americans.

Carl Stokes (1927-1996) was born in Cleveland. He began his political career when he was elected to the Ohio House of Representatives in 1962 for the first of three terms. The election made Stokes the first African American Democrat elected to the Ohio House. Stokes was elected mayor of Cleveland in 1967, becoming the first black mayor of a major American city. After serving two terms as mayor, Stokes broke another barrier in 1972—television news. He was the first African American news anchor in New York City. Stokes returned to government in 1983, serving as a municipal judge in Cleveland until 1994, when President Bill Clinton appointed him ambassador to the Republic of Seychelles.

George Washington Williams (1849-1891) was a Republican representative from Hamilton County who served in the Ohio House of Representatives during the 64th session (1880-81) of the General Assembly. He was the first African American member of the Ohio Legislature.

Granville Woods (1856-1910) was born in Columbus, Ohio. The inventor developed a variety of devices that improved railway transportation. His most notable invention was a system that let train engineers know their proximity to other trains, which reduced the number of accidents. Other inventions developed by Woods include the automatic air brake, which was used to slow or stop trains, and an improved steam-boiler furnace.



Bibliography

Encyclopedia of Cleveland History. Web Site. Oct. 6, 2003. <<http://ech.cwru.edu>>.

Gerber, David A. *Black Ohio and the Color Line*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976.

Horton James Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

Horton, James Oliver, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Jordan, Philip D. *Ohio Comes of Age: 1873-1900*. Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1968.

Knepper, George W. *Ohio and Its People*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 1989.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Web Site. Oct. 6, 2003. <<http://www.naacp.org>>.

Ohio History Connection. *The African American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920*. Web Site. Oct. 6, 2003. <<http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/html/>>.

Quillin, Frank Uriah, *The Color Line in Ohio: A History of Race Prejudice in a Typical Northern State*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1913.