

BLACKS IN THE WESTWARD EXPANSION

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Nevada is called the "Battle Born" state. It gained that motto because it entered the Union mid-way through the American Civil War. What about all of the events which occurred before? What was this place and how did it get that way? Were there any Black people here and if so, who were they and what did they do?

For the next several weeks, I will attempt to offer you a history of our state in which we will consider more than the presence and involvements of those inhabitants of European ancestry. We will pay particular attention to the presence of Black people in Nevada history.

Nevada is located in a place generally known as the Great Basin. A hundred and fifty years ago it was designated on maps as simply being a part of the "Great American Desert". Before the 1820s, no trails except those of the Paiutes, Shoshones and Washoes crossed the area. It almost carried the same epithet as did maps used by ancient sailors and travellers—"Tierra Incognita" or unknown land.

The early Spanish conquistadores were directed away from the great desert. Even though they explored throughout the surrounding areas, their flags never unfurled over the sands and creosote

bushes of Nevada was destined to become the last place, which was to become a part of the United States, to be grazed upon by the eyes of any other than native Americans.

While the Spanish were in the southwest and the French were in Canada and the valley of the Mississippi River, the English were hugging the Atlantic seaboard. The latter had come to establish colonies. The former two, while establishing some settlements, had come primarily for either gold for the king and converts for the Church or simply for adventure. Those two were Catholic countries while the English were Protestant.

The North American continent became that one place on Earth where people of different races, religions, cultures and lifestyles would meet face to face and thereafter become locked in mortal combat for the control of the continent. Paiutes, Spanish, Ibo, French, Shawnee, Ashanti, English, Iriquois, Fulani, Shoshone, Ute, Washo

and others—all vying for the same property in one form or another. Few realized that it could be shared.

The results of French and Indian Wars, which ended in the 1760s, set the boundaries in that part of North America which is east of the Mississippi River. The English were restricted to the tidewater areas of the Atlantic seaboard and the French were in Canada. The territory between the western slopes of the Allegheny mountains was Indian territory. There were intrusions in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys but there were no attempts at establishing permanent settlements. Most of those were the results of the efforts of a few individual adventurers and trappers.

That geography remained in effect, with minor changes, until 1803. During the interim, the American Revolution was waged and the new country, by 1785, had acquired what was then called the Northwest Territory. That area ultimately became Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin. The years following the close of the war witnessed Americans going off into the western lan-

ds. Leading the way were the frontiersmen.

Frederick Jackson Turner, the historian of the West, wrote that one could stand at the mouth of the Cumberland Gap and watch civilization pass right before one's eyes. Bernard DeVoto, another historian of the West, wrote that the new nation, by virtue of "manifest destiny" would ultimately extend from ocean to ocean. The movement of the new Americans was underway and, while it might have been a slow, drawn-out process, there would be no turning back.

Those Africans who had arrived here in 1619, had come, as did most other immigrants from Europe, as "indentured servants". They were not slaves. They worked for their "benefactors" for a period of five to seven years and they were then set free. They, upon release, established farms and they were to become integral parts of their small communities.

By the time slavery began, nearly sixty years later, there was a sizeable free Black population in the United States. Natural reproduction continued to increase that number.

Most of these had been men and most of them established families with Indian women. They were obviously required to be multi-lingual. They spoke their native African languages, the English which had been required in order to function in an English-speaking society and, for course, they learned to speak whatever Indian languages their wives spoke.

Even after slavery was begun, more Africans became free. They managed that by either being manumitted (set free), buying their own freedom or simply running away. The latter group had to, of necessity, run far, far away. Since they had to remove themselves from the possibility of being recaptured, they ventured far into Indian territory.

The face of North America continued to experience cosmetic changes. The English-Americans were moving into the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, the Spanish were in and out of the Florida peninsula and the southern parts of what eventually became Alabama and Mississippi and they were also in the southwest. The French were yet in Canada and some of the Acadians (Cajuns)

had gone into the lower Mississippi valley around the area of Louisiana.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, in 1803, the United States acquired a large piece of property which almost doubled its size. The Louisiana Territory was purchased from France even though it was not their's to sell. That land, as did the land inhabited by the new Americans, perhaps with the exception of Manhattan, belonged to the Native Americans. Few were concerned about legalities or a sense of right and wrong. They functioned in accord with a principle of Napoleon Bonaparte: "morality is on the side of the heaviest artillery". We all know what ultimately happened to Napoleon.

President Thomas Jefferson sent an exploratory expedition into the newly acquired territory. That venture is commonly called the Lewis and Clark Expedition. They were to make maps, collect data on flora and fauna (plan-

ts and animals), determine what Indian tribes resided there and determine suitability for the future establishment of settlements. The party

slaught of the invaders. York also sometimes functioned as an interpreter. He was the first Black person that most of the Indians had

Frenchmen, were the only non-Indians to have been in the area of the west.

The presence of York, with the Lewis and Clark expedition, brought a unique quality to the expedition. Rarely had the Indians seen Blacks and whites together. That was particularly important because they knew about the enslavement of Black people and some were also aware of the enslavement of Indians by the Spanish. On numerous instances, York served as a kind of middleman. He was the first, but he would not be the last Black man to be such.

For those with relatives in the armed services stationed overseas, or who wish to mail holiday greetings and packages to others living in foreign countries, now is the time to be making holiday mailings, according to the U.S. Postal Service.

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Professor Fitzgerald is director of ethnic studies at University of Nevada-Las Vegas

of men who participated in that adventure was small. It would be a rugged mission and each had to pull his share. It was a "no frills" package and it was anything but a vacation.

One of the men who made the journey was named York. He was Black. Like the others, he was called upon to perform numerous different tasks—hunting, cooking, collecting, gathering firewood and water, hewing out canoes and warding off those Indians who sought to protect their homelands from the on-

seen. Some others were familiar with Black people due to the numbers of runaway slaves who had gone west in order to escape the long tentacles of slavery; the presence of those "runaways", along with

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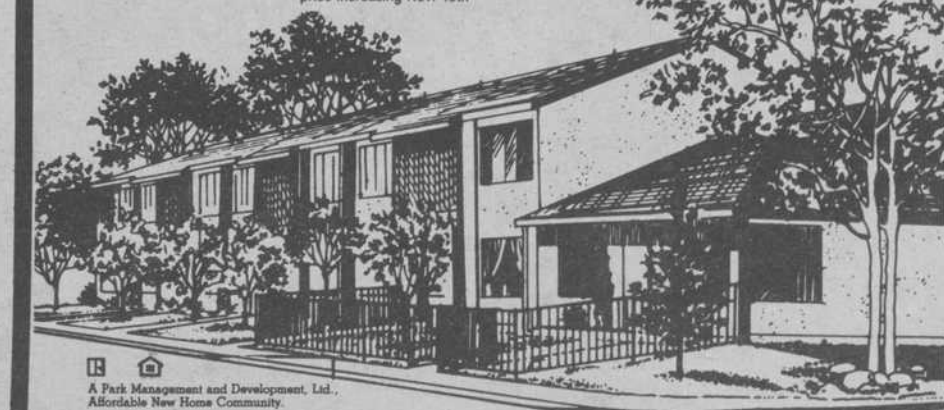


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