

Denver, CO



Origins of Juneteenth

On June 19, 1865, enslaved people in Galveston, Texas finally received the declaration of freedom and promise of absolute equality that they had been waiting for, but which had been delayed by two years. Meanwhile, 700 miles away in Denver, black Americans were already working to establish self-sufficient communities free from racial discrimination that many of them had experienced in the American South. Denver, known as The Mile High City and located between the Rocky Mountains to the west and the High Plains to the east, has a rich history and legacy centered on black Americans. In the 1850s, free blacks and enslaved people journeyed alongside fur trappers and miners to Colorado in search of financial opportunities in the gold mines. The promise of freedom in the American Southwest made Denver a prime location for those who desired a life based on the idea of "absolute equality".

Celebrations of Freedom in Denver

Emancipation Day Celebrations (1863)

During the 1850s, the Colorado Gold Rush witnessed the arrival of both free and enslaved migrants. A large number of black people from Texas also migrated to the Colorado Territory during this time in search of economic independence in the gold mining industry. The earliest black settlers in Colorado celebrated their freedom on Emancipation Day - January 1. This was to observe the date when the Emancipation Proclamation, which took effect on January 1, 1863, was announced.

“African Creeks “Emancipation Day” (1880’s)

Prior to Juneteenth, the black community in Colorado used to celebrate their freedom on August 4th. On this day, the Creek Council announced that African Creeks, those who were of mixed African and Creek ancestry, would be granted full citizenship of the Creek Nation. Many African Creeks migrated to Colorado from Oklahoma in the 1880s and brought this celebration with them. The festivities included picnics, parades, and large social gatherings.

First Official Juneteenth Celebration (1953)

The earliest Juneteenth celebrations started in the historic Denver neighborhood known as Five Points. Successful entrepreneur Otha Rice starts the first Juneteenth celebration in Denver with the support of the Five Points Business Association. This inaugural celebration of Juneteenth included a street festival and a large parade, which is the city's longest running parade to date.

Juneteenth Music Festival (2012)

The Juneteenth Music Festival (JMF) was established by a group of dedicated business owners and community leaders to reinvent how Juneteenth is celebrated in Denver. The JMF established annual Juneteenth celebrations that feature musical performances and a parade through historic Five Points.

Colorado Officially Recognizes Juneteenth (2021)

In February 2021, the City of Denver declared that Juneteenth would be a commemorative holiday in the city. Juneteenth would become Colorado's 11th official state holiday.

Trailblazers of Freedom

Clara Brown

Clara Brown, also known as the "Angel of the Rockies," was a woman who was formerly enslaved and had moved to Denver during the Colorado Gold Rush. After being granted her freedom and ordered to relocate, she left her home state of Virginia and joined a wagon train heading west to Colorado. During the trip, she worked as a cook and laundress. Clara Brown is considered to be the first African-American woman to settle in Colorado during the Gold Rush. She was also an abolitionist, philanthropist, and community leader..

Barney Ford

Barney Ford was born in 1822 in Stafford, Virginia. He was born to an enslaved mother and a white father. In his mid-twenties, he escaped to freedom and made his way to Colorado during the Colorado Gold Rush in 1860. In Denver, he became one of the most successful business owners, owning barber shops, restaurants, and hotels. Ford's Inter-Ocean Hotel was the largest and most luxurious hotel in Denver during the 1870s. As a prominent leader, Ford was the first black man to serve on a Colorado grand jury and the first black man nominated to the Colorado Territorial Legislature.

Madame C.J. Walker

Madame C.J. Walker, a resident of Denver, gained popularity and became a millionaire by excelling in the beauty and haircare industry. She revolutionized the international beauty market with her highly acclaimed "hair-straightening" technique and beauty products. Her success made her one of the most prosperous African Americans during the early 20th century.

The Path to Absolute Equality

Colorado Gold Rush of 1850

During the period of Westward Expansion, the American Southwest was seen as a beacon of hope for those who desired economic freedom. The gold mines of the Rockies attracted American settlers, white and black - free and formerly enslaved, to the region. Via wagon trains west, Black Americans migrated to Colorado and found a haven in cities like Denver and the nearby town of Dearfield, which was the state's largest all-black settlement.

Buffalo Soldiers Roam the West & Secure the Frontier

Following the Civil War, all-black regiments of colored soldiers were commanded to secure the western frontier for American settlement. They escorted military wagon trains, protected forts, and fought off Native Americans on the Great Plains. These troops were known for their tenacity and skilled fighting, even in the face of discrimination.

"Harlem of the West"

Now a historic district, Five Points was one of the earliest communities to emerge in the Mile High City during the Great Migration. Due to the location of the railway that ran through Five Points, the neighborhood attracted many Black Americans who moved to Denver for rail work. Five Points would become the home to the city's oldest Black church, the first all-black station, and many booming eateries and music halls.

Due to segregationist housing policies, by 1930 over 75% of black citizens in Denver resided in Five Points. This community became a beacon of Black success, prominence, and culture. In the mid-20th century, Five Points earned the reputation as "Harlem of the West", as local hotels and music halls attracted "A-list" jazz musicians and performers, including Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Nat King Cole.

"Lifting as We Climb" - Black Women United

Denver University has a rich history of producing successful black students and alumni. During the era of Jim Crow, the city of Denver was mostly affected by de facto segregation, resulting in the growth of tight-knit black communities on campus. From 1900-1945, several clubs and organizations were formed by networks of black women students with the aim of promoting the social, economic, and political well-being of black women in the Denver University community. Moreover, the vast majority of black graduates from Denver University went on to become public school educators. One such inspirational motto that encapsulates the spirit of these organizations is "Lifting as We Climb" - Black Women United

Otha P. Rice Sr.

Denver's inaugural Juneteenth celebration was organized by Five Points resident Otha Rice, a prominent businessman who owned a jazz club and restaurant. He remained an active participant in the festivities until 1866.



Dr. Justina Ford

Dr. Justina Ford was the first African-American woman to practice medicine in the State of Colorado. During her career, she delivered over 7,000 babies and was inducted into the Colorado Women's Hall of Fame for her legacy as a medical pioneer.



Wellington Web

In 1991, Wellington Web is named the first African American mayor in Denver.

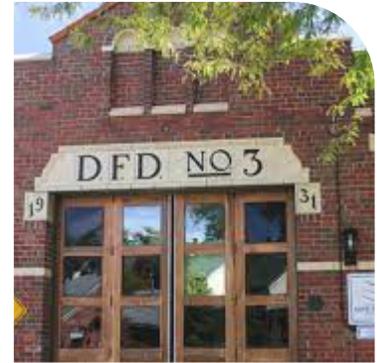


Fire Station No. 3 and crew, 1947. Courtesy of History Colorado (10038917)



BLACK AMERICAN WEST MUSEUM

FIRE STATION No.3



BLAIR-CALDWELL AFRICAN AMERICAN RESEARCH LIBRARY



CLEO PARKER ROBINSON DANCE



Historical Resources and References

Denver Library: Genealogy, African American & Western History

[Juneteenth: The Other Independence Day](#)

Tracing the History of Juneteenth

<https://www.denverpost.com/2006/06/13/tracing-the-history-of-juneteenth/>

A Historical Overview of the Black Experience at Denver University and Denver

<https://www.du.edu/equity/historical-overview-black-experience-du-and-denver>

Juneteenth and Early Black Settlers in Colorado

<https://www.museumofwesternco.com/history/juneteenth-and-early-black-settlers-in-colorado/>



www.absolteequality.org