

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Little is known about early days of Blacks in Ripon

Editor's Note: The main contributor to this article was Ripon College Professor Travis Nygard.

Since 1970, Americans have celebrated Black History Month each February. This week, explore the history of Ripon's early African-American residents.

Although most people who lived in 19th-century Ripon were white, Ripon was a multi-racial community.

The Wisconsin Historical Society noted that "In 1840, fewer than 200 African Americans lived in Wisconsin. By 1860, that number had swelled to nearly 1,200. More arrived from the south during the Civil War as northern troops swept through slave holding states."

By 1870, the Black population in Wisconsin was 2,113 and in 1880 it was 2,702. It continued to rise, but slowly, as the Wisconsin Historical Society stated that "In 1910, less than 3,000 African Americans were recorded in the Wisconsin census."

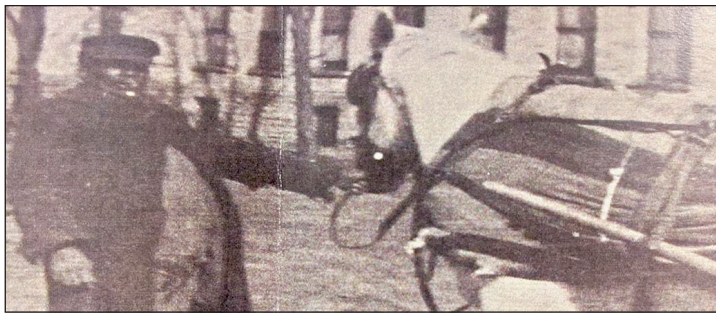
When compared to the rest of the state, one of the larger Black populations was found in Fond du Lac County. In fact, in 1870, Fond du Lac had the largest Black community of any city or county. The U.S. Census reveals that in 1860, Fond du Lac County had an African American population of 59, with 19 of those people living in the city of Fond du Lac. By 1870, the county's African American population was 209, with 179 living in the city of Fond du Lac. In 1880, the African American population decreased slightly to 206, with 178 living in the city of Fond du Lac.

Documentation of the first Black and mixed-race people to live in Ripon appears in the 1858 City Directory and the 1860 U.S. Census. The City Directory stated in parentheses "colored" after the name of three people, two of whom were barbers.

According to historian Quincy Mills, barbering was a common occupation for people of color in 19th-century America, and they often served elite white men. By doing so, the barbers frequently befriended influential people and engaged in social networking.

Perhaps that was the experience of the barber C.L. Williams (c. 1834-unknown), who was listed in the 1860 census as a "mulatto" person living in Ripon, along with his wife Jane (c. 1836-unknown) and children Emma (c. 1856-unknown), Charles (c. 1858-unknown), and Rebecca (c. 1860-unknown).

Another mixed-race barber, Edward Hall (c. 1845-unknown), was listed in the census



JOHN WILLIAMS MOVED to Ripon sometime between 1913 to 1915 and was known by the nickname "Honest John." He was reportedly born into slavery in Chattanooga, Tenn., and sold to a druggist at age 12, who kept Williams until he was emancipated.

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and lived in the same household.

According to Ripon historian Sam Pedrick (1868-1963), Henry Taylor also was also a Black barber in early Ripon.

An advertisement for Williams' barbershop first appeared in the *Ripon Weekly Times* on Dec. 23, 1859. The advertisement read, "City Barber Shop - C.L. Williams has opened his Barber and Hair Dressing Saloon in the building next south of Allen's Block on the corner opposite the Mapes House, where anything in his line will be promptly attended to, and in the most fashionable manner."

The Mapes Hotel — today doing business as The Historic Mapes Hotel — still stands at 300 Watson St. and the barbershop would have been located across the street.

Williams later relocated to a more prominent location. The last advertisement for Williams' barber shop was found in the July 15, 1864 *Ripon Commonwealth Press*. It lists his business as being located "On the public square, at the north end of City Hotel, Ripon, Wis." This would be the current location of Ripon City Hall, 100 E. Jackson Street.

In 1864, Wisconsin sent a unit of Black troops to the Civil War, as Co. F, 29th Regiment, U.S. Colored Infantry. In Civil War rolls, six Black soldiers were credited to Ripon. These included Joseph Collins, Edward Drake, Edward Foster (c. 1846-1865), Louis Greene (c. 1846-1865), Edward Hall (c. 1845-unknown) and James Olmstead (c. 1845-unknown).

The Wisconsin State Historical Society noted that many Black soldiers, "agreed to take the place of white Wisconsin residents. During the war, each state was required to supply a quota of soldiers. In order to meet those quotas, states were allowed to pay volunteers to serve in place of people drafted." Every man's service was credited to a locality. For each man credited to a locality, it reduced that community's draft quota.

The majority of these Black soldiers were not living in the

city to which they were credited and only replaced a white man who did live in that community. Collins, Drake, Foster and Greene were four of the soldiers credited to Ripon, but did not live in the community. No evidence exists that Collins and Drake even lived in Wisconsin and both enlisted in Louisiana.

Hall lived in Ripon and is noted in August and September 1864 issues of the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* as being drafted. After the war, he is listed as living in Ripon, Oshkosh and Chicago. Olmstead is listed as living in Ripon both before and after the war.

Jeff Kannel's "Make Way for Liberty, Wisconsin African Americans in the Civil War" mentioned Shepard (Shelton) Seldon (c. 1843-1909), who served in the 18th U.S. Colored Infantry as stating, "For a year or so before enlistment I lived in Ripon, Wis. Was 'steam boating.'"

Ripon would be an unusual place for someone working on steamboats to live as Ripon did not have a river. Steamboats ran down the Fox River from nearby Oshkosh to Omro, Berlin and Princeton. However, Seldon noted that in Ripon he lived with a man named "Taylor" and stated that he knew prominent local people such as Tim Mapes (1828-1904), and John Scott Horner (1802-1883). No evidence exists that Seldon came back to Wisconsin after the war.

Kannel also mentions that Jackson Hill (c. 1846-1893), while in a military hospital, stated that his wife, "Charlett Hill," lived in "Reppon, WI." He is listed as a resident of Fond du Lac County after the war.

Also included in Kannel's list of Black soldiers from the Ripon area was John Battice (unknown-1901), whose 1863 draft registration has him living in the town of Metomen. During the war, he was employed by Ripon resident Captain George W. Carter (1839-1920) of the 4th Wisconsin Regiment. When Battice was discharged from the war, he lived in Fairwater. Cart-



THE FIRST KNOWN Black student at Ripon College was George Reed Young, who appeared in the 1914 *Crimson* yearbook.

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er, who was a lawyer in Ripon, wrote multiple letters supporting Battice's veterans pension application. On his admission to the Milwaukee Soldiers' Home in 1896, Battice listed Carter as his "nearest relative."

After the Civil War, Absalom Goodlow (c. 1842-1878), came to Ripon with Hiram Town (1833-1901). Town was an officer in the 1st Wisconsin Volunteer Calvary and became the postmaster and mayor in Ripon. Some officers in the Civil War employed Black persons as servants, teamsters, blacksmiths, cooks and in other type of jobs. Perhaps Goodlow served in some type of paid capacity for Town and followed him back to Ripon.

Goodlow lived in Ripon with his wife, Susan (c.1851-unknown), and son, William (c. 1868-unknown). He worked in Ripon's livery and ran the affiliated horse-drawn autobus — a precursor to today's taxis. When the livery caught fire in 1878, he bravely attempted to put it out, thus becoming a local hero.

Other Black persons seen in Ripon were discussed by Pedrick in the August 20, 1937 *Ripon Commonwealth Press*.

Pedrick wrote that two Black Civil War veterans, Lewis and Tennessee Payton, lived near the Center House, N4443 Horner Road and "were frequently seen in Ripon, which they made their market town."

John Williams, (c. 1840-1923) another African-American, moved to town sometime between 1913 and 1915. He also was known by the nickname "Honest John." He was reportedly born into slavery in Chattanooga, Tenn., and sold to a druggist at age 12, who kept Williams until he was emancipated.

Williams' obituary in the June 22, 1923 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* stated that "He came to the vicinity about eight or 10 years ago and lived in a shack on lower State Street. He plied his trade of paper gatherer and was not a charge of the city.

John was a religious personage and Sundays would spend his time reading from the Bible. He claimed to have been a druggist at one time. Some surmise that he ran away from his master while a slave in the south, and it is this fear, probably, that kept him from divulging anything about his past history."

It is worth noting that although some of the Ripon community's early African-American history is known, much also remains speculative. The early history of students at Ripon College is a case in point.

Because the institution did not record information about the racial profile of its students, it is unknown who the first Black students were. However, based on research from photographs and letters that was undertaken by Ripon College archivist Andrew Prellwitz and alumnus Marshall Sohr, it is known that by 1912, a Black student named "George Reed Young" was on the college track team.

By 1924, another student of color, Robert Page Sims Jr., attended the freshman "walk-around" with the white student Pearl Pierce Dopp as his date.

He was the son of Robert Page Sims Sr. (1872-1944), an early African American civil rights leader, academic, scientist and the president of Bluefield State University of West Virginia (then named the "Bluefield Colored Institute"). This was one of the nation's historically black colleges and universities.

Individuals who know of additional information about the early Black history of Ripon, may share it with the Ripon Historical Society. The organization is hoping to expand its holdings of information about diversity within the community.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org.