

The Urban Pioneers

While some blacks were proving themselves able farmers and ranchers, others were drawn to a more urban lifestyle. The railroads played a role in attracting emigrants to the Pacific Northwest by offering discounts to the various towns on the line. Until 1893 the terminus for the state of Washington was Tacoma; Seattle and Spokane played second fiddle to this prosperous town. When the Great Panic of 1893 hit, the railroads went bankrupt along with many other businesses. When the time came to refinance the railroads with Eastern money, those investors looked with great favor upon the bustling town of Seattle. Seattle was in the midst of a construction boom as a result of being burned to the ground in the fire of 1889. In 1895 the Northwest terminus of the railroad was moved to Seattle, and Seattle's economic success was assured.

Blacks traveled by foot, train and boat to the Pacific Northwest, seeking what one new arrival referred to as "free air." These families came in search of a new life free of discrimination. They came to the cities to work as waiters, porters, barbers and laborers. Many later pursued careers as publishers, attorneys and businessmen.

SEATTLE

The earliest black urban pioneer, Manual Lopes, was born in Africa in 1812 and was believed to have been kidnapped and enslaved before arriving in Massachusetts. He probably worked as a sailor in New England before making his way to Seattle. Lopes arrived in Seattle in 1852 and promptly started a barbering business, complete with the first barber chair brought to Seattle via Cape Horn. He also operated a restaurant in the same building that housed his barber shop on First Avenue South. Well known for his generosity towards working men, Lopes often gave them meals and lodging even if they were unable to pay.