
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, and Seattle 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." Several Black families settled in Tacoma and Seattle. 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.

Both Seattle and Tacoma grew rapidly, with the population exploding between 1900 and 1910. In 1900 there were 307 Blacks in Tacoma and 406 in Seattle. By 1910 there were 778 Blacks in Tacoma and 2,296 in Seattle.

Pierce County (1910)	Males	514
	Females	375
	TOTAL	890

King County (1910)	Males	1506
	Females	981
	TOTAL	2487

Tacoma

Record-keeping involving Blacks was very sporadic and not much information is available before 1889 although the city of Tacoma was founded in 1868. Some of Tacoma's earliest urban Black pioneers were Edward Frank and Mary M. Edson, grandparents of Charlotte Breckenridge. The Edsons left Kentucky heading west, stopping first in California. Not satisfied in California, they continued to Washington in early 1889. In Tacoma Mr. Edson became a prominent businessman with a barber shop located at 1139 Commerce Street.

Mrs. Edson taught music in their home at 1422 K Street for more than fifty years. Together, they were among the organizers of the Allen A.M.E. Church on October 9, 1889. Mrs. Edson organized the first choir in the church and served as its first organist. Like most early Tacomans,



Edward Frank Edson