

DeNorval Unthank: Dedicated Doctor and Civil Rights Activist

December 1899 — September 1977

DeNorval Unthank was one of the first Black physicians in Oregon and the only Black doctor practicing in Portland during the 1930s.

He moved his family to Portland in 1929, recruited by the Union Pacific Railroad to treat its Black workers. At that time, Portland's small Black population lived edgily alongside the much larger White population. In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan was visible, active, and well connected in city and state government.

Oregon was ripe territory for the Klan. Its racial makeup had been shaped by Black exclusion laws that, although later rescinded, largely succeeded in their aim of discouraging free Black people from settling here, ensuring that it would develop as primarily White.

The Unthank family chose Portland's Westmoreland neighborhood. Their new neighbors tried to convince them to go elsewhere, even offering money. When Dr. Unthank refused, he and his family became victims of harassment, vandalism, and threats. They had to move four times before they were able to settle down.

Dr. Unthank proceeded to build up his practice, treating Asian and White patients as well as Black ones, even as he faced racism in his profession, often barred from local hospitals and excluded from medical societies. He worked for years to overcome these barriers. He was often quoted as saying, "A Negro may have a few more doors closed to him, and he may find them a little harder to open; but he can open them. He must keep trying." In 1958, the Oregon Medical Society named him Oregon Doctor of the Year.

The war years were a time of great change. Between 1941 and 1943, Portland's Black population grew from 2,000 to 20,000. In 1943, Dr. Unthank became the first Black member of the Portland City Club. He was a cofounder of the Portland Urban League in 1945 and served as president of the Portland chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He was also a member of the state Committee for Equal Rights and the Council of Social Agencies and was active in the passage of Oregon's 1953 Civil Rights Bill.

Dr. Unthank's achievements were numerous, his awards many. For his role in bringing down racial barriers, the City of Portland dedicated a park in North Portland's Boise neighborhood in his honor in 1969. At that time, he was the only living Portland citizen to have such a space named after him.

The Oregon History Project:

<https://oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/biographies/dr-denorval-unthank-biography/>

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeNorval_Unthank

Oregon Encyclopedia: https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/unthank_denorval_1899_1977/

Black Exclusion Laws in Oregon: https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/exclusion_laws/

Letitia Carson: First Black Woman to Own Property in Oregon

1814-1818 — February 1888

Note: The State Library of Oregon is hosting an exhibit called "Letitia Carson: An Enduring Spirit of Hope and Freedom" through February 26, 2026 (Salem).

Letitia Carson was one of the first Black women to settle in Oregon. In the 1850s, she brought two successful lawsuits against a White defendant over her right to own property, and she was the first Black person to file a land claim in Oregon under the Homestead Act of 1862.

Born into slavery, by 1844 Letitia was living in Missouri with David Carson, a White man and the father of her unborn child. In May 1845, they joined other emigrants on the wagon trail to Oregon; Letitia gave birth to their first child along the way. By December, David had claimed 640 acres in Benton County. Over the next several years, he and Letitia grew potatoes and fruit trees and raised hogs and cattle; and she gave birth to their second child.

In 1850, the U.S. Congress passed the Donation Land Claim Act. It legitimized the land-claim process established by the Oregon Provisional Government, but it changed the terms of eligibility to exclude Black Americans, thus reducing the Carson homestead by half.

When David died in 1852, the probate court appointed a White neighbor, Greenberry Smith, administrator of his estate. Because there was no will, Smith was able to determine the rightful inheritors, and he named David's Eastern relatives, rather than Letitia or their children. He auctioned off their land, property, and personal possessions. Letitia paid \$104.87 to buy back what she could of her own possessions: a washtub, a pot, a skillet and lid, six plates, a bed and bedding, two cows, and a calf.

Letitia and her two young children were now homeless. They found their way to Douglas County, where she worked as a domestic servant and served as a midwife. She also began to seek damages for her losses. A Corvallis attorney filed two lawsuits on her behalf in 1854. The first sought \$11,200; the original jury could not reach a verdict, but the retrial jury was unanimous in awarding her \$300. A second lawsuit over her ownership of cattle enabled her to recover \$1,200.

There is no record of Letitia and her children between these trials and June 1863, when she filed a claim under the Homestead Act, which entitled any adult citizen of the United States to claim up to 160 acres of government land in the West. "Letitia Carson" is written on the signature line of her claim, along with an X and the annotation "her mark," confirming that she filed the claim in person. The recorder at the land office would have seen that Letitia was a

Black woman, but he signed the affidavit despite the U.S. Supreme Court's 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision, which declared Black Americans ineligible for citizenship.

Letitia settled on her claim and began making the required improvements. After the required 5-year residency period, she filed for a homestead certification; and she was among the 71 Oregonians who received homestead patents in the first year they were issued (1869).

In 2014, Oregon author Jean Kirkpatrick published a novel based on Letitia Carson's life, *A Light in the Wilderness*.

Oregon Encyclopedia: <https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/carson-letitia/>

Oregon Black Pioneers digital history project: <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/>

MORE PEOPLE AND EVENTS THAT HELPED SHAPE PORTLAND AND OREGON

For 10 years in the 1970s, **Portland's Black Panther Party** fed kids before school and provided medical and dental services, creating an enduring legacy in the community.

https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/black_panthers_in_portland/

On Memorial Day 1948, the Columbia River roared downstream, 15 feet above the flood plain in Portland, to undermine a railroad embankment and a dike. The resulting **Vanport Flood** destroyed the residential community built for Kaiser's wartime shipyard workers, leaving 18,000 people homeless and significantly altering race relations in Portland.

<https://www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/essays/the-vanport-flood/>

At 240 N. Broadway, a stone's throw from The Rose Garden, a worn brick building stands alone, a forlorn island in a sea of traffic. Today it houses a plastics company, but in its heyday, it was Portland's premier jazz venue — the Dude Ranch. And on the night of December 5, 1945, it was the site of what may have been the **greatest jazz jam in Portland history**. Though Lionel Hampton, Art Tatum, and the Nat "King" Cole Trio would appear in later days, no night ever equaled that night — with Norman Granz and his touring jam session, "Jazz at the Philharmonic", and legendary saxophonist Coleman Hawkins leading a group that included trombonist Roy Eldridge, bassist Al McKibbon, and a 25-year-old pianist with "a lightning-like right hand" who was soon to usher in the bebop age — Thelonious Monk.

<https://www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/essays/a-look-back-at-portland-jazz/>

Long before Oregon became a state, Black people were in the Far West. Some were brought here as slaves, but many others arrived as freemen looking for a new life. They opened boarding houses and stores, worked farms and mined for gold. But as more White settlers arrived over the Oregon Trail, the newcomers passed discriminatory laws to keep African Americans out. OPB's "Oregon Experience" examined the largely unknown history of **Oregon's Black pioneers**. [Oregon's Black Pioneers: Full Documentary | Oregon Experience | OPB](#)