

local community, and to Oregon's historical tapestry, are invaluable. Ramsey is eloquent on the cultural impact of local historical societies:

We are doing essential work. From an academic's perspective, I know how little respect local history gets in the academy, but to me, local history is essential to historical study: local histories are how we flesh out our portrait of America. The way you trace important historical events and figures are through their effect on everyday lives, and the story of small towns' fortunes and demographics are tied intrinsically to broader regional and national trends. If you want to know your history as a society, it's important to document it at this level—it fleshes history out, and connects it to lived experience.

Beyond historical societies' academic and educational value, Jerald adds, they also build community. "Like almost any community in Oregon, our demographics are changing rapidly—we have the most ethnically diverse population in the state," Jerald explains. "A historical society like this lets us document this change while setting up a sense of historical continuity; it lets us recognize and celebrate this change while linking it to what came before. And ultimately, it lets newcomers step into a stream that comes from a long way back and will go a long way forward, giving everyone a sense of place and broader community."

OREGON BLACK PIONEERS

Across the state, organizations with similar missions are working to preserve Oregon's heritage and link it to the future. Some of these societies, however, focus not on a specific town or county but on a marginalized community, ensuring that Oregon's historical narrative is growing both broader and more nuanced. As such, these organizations complement and reinforce the nonprofits profiled in Chapter Five that advocate for the representation and rights of marginalized communities.

Salem residents Willie Richardson and Gwen Carr are the driving forces behind Oregon Black Pioneers, Oregon's preeminent African American public historical society. In a small office above Pioneer Trust Bank on Commercial Street in downtown Salem, they tell us about their work. "We want greater Oregon to be aware of the impact African Americans have had on the development of our state," Willie begins. "Ours is a rich, rich culture and history, and it's important that people know that, far from being exclusive to Portland, African Americans have lived across the state, in small and large communities alike, and have had a major impact on our statewide history."



(Left) Part of the “All Aboard” exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society. Courtesy Oregon Black Pioneers. (Right) Willie Richardson and Gwen Carr of Oregon Black Pioneers. Photo by Kristin Anderson.

As Gwen explains:

What is unique about Oregon’s history is that Oregon was a free territory and a free state and yet had black exclusion laws on the books to prevent black settlement. Our racial history is pretty bleak, and Oregon’s small black population today is a legacy of those laws. But people don’t realize that black people were among the first settlers of Oregon: they were on the ships exploring its coastline; they came over on wagon trains. We didn’t just arrive in the 1920s and 1940s—we have a long history here.

Documenting that history is important for several reasons, Gwen says. “When you leave out information from historical record whether you do it intentionally or not, you give an inaccurate picture of how we came to be as a state. And for the individual, when history leaves out a particular segment, whether it’s black or Latino or Asian or gay . . . if it looks like you weren’t here, then you have no sense that you’re important, that you have ownership of the state and a connection to it.”

Oregon Black Pioneers does not just celebrate and publicize the history, Willie adds. “We also uncover it. . . . We are piecing together a fuller history so we can know *what* to celebrate—that’s the charge and the mission, really getting to know African American history here.” The records they have discovered have been substantial and surprising: they have found African American influence in every corner of the state. “Ultimately, we want to make sure that in the future telling of the Oregon story, it is inclusive and reflects African American impact. Things get glossed over.” There was a historical marker on the coast documenting the site where, in 1788, an unnamed crewmember of Robert Gray’s ship the *Lady Washington* was killed, Gwen recounts. Oregon

Black Pioneers lobbied for the marker to be updated: the crewmember killed was Marcus Lopeus, the first documented person of African descent to set foot in Oregon.⁸

Like most historical societies, the organization's budget is tiny. While Gwen and Willie dream of having a paid staff person and a permanent museum rather than temporary exhibits in other facilities, Oregon Black Pioneers would need considerably more support to reach that goal. But in a sterling example of local corporate philanthropy, Pioneer Trust Bank (a Salem heritage institution in its own right, started by Asahel Bush and William S. Ladd in 1869) has been incredibly generous with its support of Oregon Black Pioneers, underwriting exhibits and even donating rent-free office space in its own headquarters.

Like the Jefferson County Historical Society, Oregon Black Pioneers embodies the essential and enormous role volunteers play within Oregon's cultural sectors. Its exhibits, including "All Aboard!: Railroading and Portland's Black Community," presented at the Oregon Historical Society in spring 2013, have helped expand Oregonians' awareness of the diversity of our history. Without Willie Richardson, Gwen Carr, and the diligence, passion, and scholarship of Oregon Black Pioneers' other volunteers, Oregon's history would be less complete, less *true*. "As a culture, we forget that we're intertwined, that we're dependent upon each other," Willie says. "Your history isn't yours alone: others impact you. The good, the bad, the awful—it's all relevant to who you are, to who we are. It's *our* story—it's *Oregon's* story—and it needs to be told."

OREGON NIKKEI LEGACY CENTER, BILL NAITO,
AND THE NIKKEI ENDOWMENT

Oregon's Japanese American community has been working with similar vigor to uncover, preserve, and share its history. For twenty-five years, landscape architect Robert Murase had been working on his dream to build a memorial to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, but it was not until he teamed up with the formidable visionary Bill Naito in the late 1980s that the project became a reality.

Slight of build, with a neatly trimmed beard, Bill was a Nisei (second generation Japanese American). He fought in World War II as an infantryman and translator, and later became a pillar of the Portland business community, with boundless energy for work and volunteer activities. His love of urban Portland was legendary: he is generally credited with providing the leadership that halted the further decline of downtown Portland by cleverly rebranding the derelict Skid Row district of Portland as "Old Town" and by providing substantial investments to renovate and preserve old historic buildings.