

Rachel Belden Brooks and Family

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By Danielle Strom

In 1844, a strong desire to avoid racial tensions led the Oregon Provisional Government to outlaw slavery in the Oregon Country. However compassionate this may sound, it was closely followed by a ban on the settling of free blacks in the region. Both laws were designed to keep the black population at a minimum and avoid conflict. Despite these decrees, many families brought slaves on their journey west and few, if any, of the slaves were set free upon entering Oregon. Rachel Belden was one of these, and is the first known black woman of Marion County.¹

Born in Tennessee in 1829,² Rachel was raised as a slave, working in the fields and home of her masters. Like many slaves in that day, Rachel accepted the last name of her first master, becoming Rachel Belden. Around 1840 she became the property of Daniel Delaney, Sr. Preparing to stake his claim in the West, Delaney (also spelled Delany) sold his plantation and all of his slaves to a man in Tennessee. However, Mrs. Elizabeth Magee Delaney was very ill, practically an invalid, and in need of care. To secure a caretaker for his wife, Delaney bought Rachel Belden for \$1000.³ Shortly thereafter, the Delaney family moved to Missouri where they prepared for their journey over the Oregon Trail. When they left, other notable men such as Daniel Waldo and Peter Burnett, and families such as the Nesmiths, Applegates, and Looneys, accompanied the Delaneys while Dr. Marcus Whitman was "their captain and guide."⁴ These were only a few of over one hundred families to start on the Great Migration: the first significant overland trek to make it as far as The Dalles.⁵ Mr. and Mrs. Delaney crossed the plains with Rachel and three of their five sons⁶, settling in the Champooick District (later named Marion County) in 1843.⁷

It is possible that Rachel was unaware of the law that declared her a free woman in the Oregon Country and therefore stayed with the Delaney family for the next two decades. Besides taking care of the ailing Mrs. Delaney, Rachel did the housework and took care of the garden.⁸ Moreover, noted pioneer John Minto later commented on her industriousness as she worked side by side with the Delaney boys in the orchards and fields.⁹ Different writers give varied accounts of the character of Rachel's master. On one hand, he was a caring man, well liked and hospitable to everyone, including his slaves. A southern gentleman in every way, "Mr. Delany was so highly respected and his good deeds of helpfulness to the settlers that came after him so well known," that his death caused terrible sadness.¹⁰ Another writer suggests that he did little work himself and "seemed to read his bible chiefly to find in it support for his dominion over the soul and body of his female slave."¹¹ Whatever sort of man he was, Rachel lived with him and the family until federal law set her free during the Civil War. During this time, Rachel bore two sons: Newman, born in 1847 (also referred to as Noah), and Jack (also known as Jackson or Jack De Wolf).¹² It is suspected that Mr. Delaney fathered these two mulatto boys.¹³

Even as Rachel was an important first in Marion County, her son Jack played a role in another first, the first murder trial in Marion County. Many knew Daniel Delaney, Sr. as a wealthy man and the temptation of his supposed fortune became too much for George Beale and George Baker. On January 9, 1865, these men painted their faces black, rode to the Delaney property where, to their knowledge, Mr. Delaney was alone. After a brief struggle, they shot Delaney and left him to die. Jack, a well-known companion and servant of Delaney, saw the whole episode take place.¹⁴ When authorities later apprehended Beale and Baker, it was the testimony of this young boy that stood strongest against them. Both men were convicted

and publically hung; the first in Marion County to die for a capital offense. Amazingly, the house that was the center of Rachel's everyday life, and the location of the murder of Daniel Delaney still stands today just outside of Turner.¹⁵

In 1864, Rachel married the widower Nathan Brooks. In March 1865 and again in November of that year, Nathan brought a suit against Mr. Delaney (probably Daniel Delaney, Jr.).¹⁶ Without records, we can only assume it had something to do with Rachel and her sons. One family researcher suggests that it was a "suit on the estate of Delany on behalf of her son for \$1000," but there is no source noted.¹⁷ During this time, the Brooks' lived on the nearby farm of Daniel Waldo and later moved to Salem. Nathan and Rachel raised two sons of their own, Samuel and Mansfield, along with Jack. Her oldest son, Newman, lived and worked with the Stanley family in East Salem.¹⁸

Nathan Brooks died in 1874, but Rachel was not left destitute. She worked hard to support her family, and the 1877 tax records show that Mrs. Brooks "owned 144 homestead acres on the west side of the Willamette River near the bend in the river across from Keizer."¹⁹ Blacks had come a long way since the 1844 Exclusion Act and, even though multiple exclusion laws had been passed over the years, the black population continued to grow. By the 1870 census, Marion County had the second largest population of blacks and mulattoes in Oregon after Multnomah County.²⁰ Rachel was just one of these. From 1902 on, she is included in the *Salem and Marion County Directory*, showing her acceptance as part of the community. She resided near "w s Commercial [and] n Mill Creek" for several years, then is listed in the 1909-1910 directory as boarding at the corner of Miller and Fir Streets. Rachel died October 12, 1910 and is buried in an unmarked grave in the Delaney plot at Pioneer Cemetery.²¹

From what little we know of her, Rachel Belden Brooks must have been an amazing woman. As the first black woman of Marion County, she undoubtedly felt alone and isolated. Yet she somehow moved beyond her restrictions, and, as the *Book of Remembrances of Marion County* notes, became "a familiar figure about the streets, known as Aunt Rachel Brooks."²²

Endnotes

¹ Sarah Hunt Steeves, *Book of Remembrance of Marion County, Oregon: Pioneers 1840-1860* (Portland, OR: The Berncliff Press, 1927) p- and Turner House. Rachel may have arrived shortly after America Waldo, the black daughter of Daniel Waldo, or they may have made the overland journey in the same wagon train. **Please see end clarification about this statement

² Pioneer Index, OHS

³ A Peculiar Paradise, website, and Steeves. Several sources agree on this price, however the Pioneer Index at the Oregon Historical Society Research Library lists the sum as \$550.

⁴ Steeves, p 14

⁵ Turner's Delaney House by Matt Hays

⁶ Steeves and Minto. Some sources suggest they brought all five sons with them to Oregon, but other records show that this is unlikely.

⁷ Pioneer Index

⁸ Steeves

⁹ Minto p 49

¹⁰ Steeves p 19

¹¹ Minto p49

¹² A Peculiar Paradise, website, Steeves, Hidden Citizens.

¹³ . . .

¹⁴ Peculiar Paradise

¹⁵ Turner House

¹⁶ Oregon Statesman 20 March 1865 and 4 December 1865

- ¹⁷ Family research website
¹⁸ Hidden Citizens
¹⁹ Ibid
²⁰ Oregon Quarterly
²¹ Hidden Citizens
²² Steeves

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- Brian Waldo Johnson, Associate Research Fellow, Teaching Research Institute, Western Oregon University wrote the following regarding America Waldo's parentage: Based on US Census records and the dates on her tombstone, America Waldo was born June 2, 1844 in Missouri. Since Daniel Waldo and his family left Missouri for Oregon in June, 1843, neither America Waldo nor her mother could have accompanied Daniel Waldo on the 1843 wagon train; and Daniel Waldo could not be her biological father. Considering the family tradition reported by America's descendants that her father was "one of two Waldo brothers" (1974 taped interview with Kathelyn Bogle); America's birth date of June, 1844 in Missouri one year after Daniel's departure; and the fact that Daniel's younger, unmarried brother Joseph Waldo remained in Missouri until 1846 before coming to Oregon; -- Joseph would seem the more likely candidate to be America's biological father. America Waldo did later move to Oregon (possibly accompanying Daniel's brother Joseph on the 1846 wagon train) where Daniel Waldo, as head of the family, took responsibility for raising her and thus acted as a father figure.