

Dangerous Subjects: James D. Saules and the Enforcement of the Color Line in Oregon.

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"Dangerous Subjects": James D. Saules and the Enforcement of the Color Line in Oregon.

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Abstract

In June of 1844, James D. Saules, a black sailor turned farmer in the Willamette Valley, was arrested and convicted for allegedly inciting violence against a settler named Charles E. Pickett. Three years earlier, James Saules, a member of the United States Exploring Expedition, married a Chinookan woman and conducted business on the Columbia River. Less than two months following the Provisional Government passed its infamous "Lash Law," banning free black people to the region. While the government repealed the law, it passed a territorial black exclusion law in 1849 and included a similar provision in its 1857 state constitution. Oregon's territorial delegate also convinced Congress to exclude black people from the 1850 Donation Land Act. In the years following, politicians suggested the legacy of the Saules case by stressing that black men, particularly sailors, from coming to Oregon and collaborating with Native groups to commit acts of violence against white settlers.

This thesis explains the unusual persistence of black exclusion in the Pacific Northwest focusing on the life of Saules, both before and after white American settlement in the region in large numbers. Black exclusion in Oregon was neither a byproduct of American expansion nor a means to prevent slavery from taking root. Instead, racial exclusion was central to the land-centered settlement of the Pacific Northwest. Prior to the Americanization of the Pacific Northwest, the region was home to a cosmopolitan and increasingly fluid culture that included Native groups, exogenous fur industry workers, and missionaries. This period made possible by colonialism and the rise of merchant capital and was a period which lasted from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. It was likely a world very familiar to Saules, who had spent his entire life in various seaports. However, the American immigrants who arrived in the early 1840s sought to dismantle this multiethnic social order and create a homogenous settler society based on classical republican ideals. Although Saules was born in the United States, American settler colonialist ideology, denied most non-whites a place in their settlements. During the early decades of resettlement, white American settlers faced attacks from the preexisting population. Therefore, many settlers like Saules, a worldly sailor with connections among Native people, sought to ensure the security of their nascent communities.

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