

Montana's African American Heritage Resources Project

IN 2005, the Montana Historical Society (MHS) and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) initiated Montana's African American Heritage Resources Project. Its goals were to begin compiling and distributing resources on Montana's African American history from the MHS's collections and SHPO's historic preservation inventories. These resources provide documentation on the myriad ways that Montana's African American community contributed to the region's development within the context of national issues and historical themes, enabling the public to engage with Black historical experiences in Montana. The stories of Black Montanans help people across the United States better understand, embrace, and preserve our diverse history and cultural landscape.

In the fifteen years since starting the project, historians, staff, and volunteers combed the Montana Historical Society collections for manuscripts, oral histories, newspaper articles, artifacts, census records, and photographs that told the stories of the state's African American residents. Researchers Patty Dean and Scott Meredith, who worked on the first phase of the project, compiled a searchable database of census information, assembled and annotated primary- and secondary-source bibliographies, and created several biographical databases. They transcribed the information on African American residents in Montana listed in the 1870, 1910, and 1930 censuses. Alan Thompson identified hundreds of photographs associated with African American history in MHS's collections and conducted hours of interviews for an oral history database, supplementing existing oral histories at MHS. The project's staff, interns, and volunteers developed timelines, lesson plans, and a website on Montana's African American history and historical resources. Anthony Wood's article, "After the West Was Won: How African American Buffalo

Soldiers Invigorated the Helena Community in Early Twentieth Century Montana" in the Autumn 2016 issue of *Montana The Magazine of Western History* grew out of his research during the project, and he contributed rosters of African Americans stationed at Fort Harrison, as well as a number of essays and historic property records.

The Montana's African American Heritage Places project has documented more than fifty historic places critical to Montana's African American history. The project's website, <https://mhs.mt.gov/Shpo/AfricanAmericans>, provides data, contexts, story maps, property inventories, bibliographies, relevant legislation, and a comprehensive interactive timeline. A special project, "Montana in the Green Book," catalogs Montana's listings in *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, which offered listings of non-segregated businesses friendly to African American travelers between 1936 and 1964, including lodgings, restaurants, service stations, and recreation opportunities. Dr. Delia Hagen documented twenty-six historic properties, nominated several to the National Register, and compiled an extensive Multiple Properties Documentation form examining African American History in Montana. Her report won the 2018 Excellence in Consulting Award from the National Council on Public History.

Montana boasts more than 1,190 National Register listings statewide, but only fourteen of those properties are listed in association with African American history. Six convey the significance of a singular person or family, including: the Belt Historic District, where Mattie Castner co-founded the town of Belt with her husband; the Morgan-Case Homestead west of Phillipsburg; Bozeman's Samuel Lewis House, built by a prominent African American businessman; and Helena's Crump-Howard House, Dorsey Grocery and Residence, and Haight-Bridgwater

House. Four nineteenth-century forts are also listed: Ft. Missoula, Ft. Assinniboine, Ft. Shaw, and Ft. Keogh, where members of the 24th and 25th Infantry and the 9th and 10th Cavalry garrisoned. Listed in 2008, the Union Bethel Falls African Methodist Episcopal Church reflects Great Falls' rich African American legacy. Three other buildings that functioned as churches, the AME Church and Mt. Zion Baptist in Anaconda and Shaffer's Chapel in Butte, constitute three of the nearly six thousand contributors within the Butte-Anaconda National Historic Landmark program.

Recently, Montana's African American Heritage project was awarded a \$50,000 grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund to make a documentary film that integrates the African American historical narrative into the larger story of Montana's historic places. This project will re-imagine, interpret, and encourage nationwide public engagement with Montana's African American history and will provide new creative content in the form of a suite of research-based historical poems on the African American presence and experiences in Montana. The work of award-winning poet Sean Hill will enhance the project by adding a new, engaging perspective on Black experiences in Montana and the West. With a

broad audience of teachers, students, researchers and the general public, the film will be promoted on social media, YouTube, local access television, the project website, and in-person venues, with the ultimate hope that Montana's community will use the film, poetry, and documentation to learn about the important role of African Americans in Montana's history and culture. The film will also provide a catalyst for future action by encouraging viewers to share their family stories and identify additional places in their communities, creating a cycle of discovery, outreach, and preservation.

This digital issue of *Montana The Magazine of Western History* is an invitation to look deeply into African American history in Montana and the West, and it draws upon and operates in concert with [Montana's African American Heritage Resources](#) website. There are essays, timelines, lesson plans, interactive maps, demographic data, and multiple other resources to gain a deeper understanding of Black history in Montana. These projects have been made possible by grants from the National Park Service's Underrepresented Communities Grant Program, the Montana History Foundation, the Montana Cultural Trust, and other organizations.

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