The Oregon Trail was the largest voluntary migration of people in American history, however just 3% of Oregon Trail emigrants were Black. Of that small number, even fewer Black overlanders were headed to Oregon, as California was a more common destination after the 1849 gold rush. The reason why is because the white founders of Oregon explicitly legislated against Blacks coming here. From 1844-1857, Oregon passed three laws which prohibited people of African descent from enjoying equality before the law, from participating in civic life, and from living freely among their white neighbors. All at a time when the Black population in Oregon never rose above 1%.

Free Blacks did not fit within the dichotomy of colonized/colonizer which white supremacist legislators sought to impose. As the first few Blacks began coming to Oregon by sea and then on the first wagon trains, white Oregonians frantically worked to stop any further Black migration, less they be forced to align themselves with Black neighbors. At various times, all three Black exclusion laws were repealed or made unenforceable by federal legislation, exempting the few Blacks already living in Oregon from expulsion and creating brief windows for a handful of Black newcomers to arrive on the Oregon Trail.

Because the peak years of the Oregon Trail are the same years when Oregon legally excluded Blacks from residency and legal protections, very few Blacks made the journey to Oregon on their own free will. Everything that is known about Blacks on the Oregon Trail comes from white sources, as few Black men and women were literate and kept accounts of their travels. In the 1840-1850s, there were also not many free Blacks in America with the financial means to afford the cross-continental trip. Even if they could afford it, they faced the possibility of arriving in Oregon to find that they had no legal means to live here, file a land claim, or start a business.

Sources show us that the vast majority of Black overlanders traveled to Oregon in the service of white families. While the arduous journey across North America was a shared experience that bridged racial divides, Black and white travelers had different labors on the Oregon Trail. Black men typically served as teamsters or hostlers on the trail. Their role was to drive the carts of oxen or mules, and to take care of the animals. Black women on the Oregon Trail were almost exclusively caretakers. Some estimates say 1/5 of the adult women on the Oregon Trail were pregnant. Black women in America were frequently relied upon to help deliver and nurse children, and to raise them once they were toddlers. This continued on the Oregon Trail, where Black women cooked, cleaned, and fed children and the infirmed. Figures like George Bush and George Washington, who traveled on the Oregon Trail in 1844 and 1850 respectively, represent the rare example of free Black travelers who willingly went west on their own volition to seek new opportunities. Still, both men arrived in Oregon to find they were unable to settle here and went north into British controlled lands in what is today Washington State.

Slavery was another painful reality of the Black experience along the Oregon Trail. Enslaved Black travelers were subject to poor rations and physical abuse. In the 1843 Oregon Trail recollections of Charlotte Matheny Kirkwood, she recalls how Washington County pioneer Alexander Zachary beat his slave Marth with a chain for waking him when she got up in the middle of the night to cook herself some food. These hardships did not end after arriving in Oregon. While slavery had been outlawed in the Territory since the Organic Laws of 1843, the 1844 Black Exclusion Law allowed those who brought slaves to Oregon up to 2 years to free enslaved Black men or 3 years to free enslaved Black women.

At least 50 Blacks brought to Oregon via the Oregon Trail were kept as slaves in the Territory. This does not include those who were enslaved but were offered their freedom in exchange for helping their white owners reach Oregon. Many Blacks were held in bondage far longer than the Oregon law allowed. Rachel Belden, a migrant on an 1843 wagon train, and Cora Cox, who traveled on an 1853 train, both were kept enslaved until the end of the US Civil War. In 1844, an enslaved family of five, the Holmes’, were brought to Oregon as the property of Nathaniel Ford. While parents Robin and Polly Holmes had been emancipated in Oregon, Ford refused to free their two surviving children, leading to an 1852 lawsuit won by the Holmes family. Even though the Holmes children were now legally free, Ford still demanded $700 in 1857 for the release of teenaged Mary Jane Holmes so she could marry Black farmer Reuben Shipley, himself an enslaved pioneer of 1853.

The racial gap among Oregon pioneers grew even wider after the Donation Land Claim Act was passed in 1850. This federal act granted 320 acres of free land in the Oregon Territory to every unmarried white male citizen 18+, and 640 acres to every white married couple, who arrived between Sep. 28 and Dec. 1, 1850, or half that claim for those who came between Dec. 1850 and Dec. 1853. Blacks were banned from Oregon for 7 of 10 years between 1850 and 1860, when whites came in droves to stake their claims.

Even for the few Blacks already living in Oregon though, they had no ability to take advantage of this federal act. Free Blacks were ineligible to file a claim under the Donation Land Claim Act, meaning the promise of free land was unavailable to them. During the 10-year span which saw the greatest increase in population in Oregon’s history, Oregon’s Black population actually *decreased* by almost 40%. The effect is that Oregon’s Black population has never grown proportionally to the state’s white population.

In 1866, the 14th amendment to the US Constitution made it legal for Blacks to reside in Oregon. Between 1866 and 1870 alone, Oregon’s Black population increased over 2.5x. Black migrants came overland and by steamship, spending whatever money they had to take advantage of the Oregon gold rush and mining boom in southern Oregon, and to finally seek out a land claim of their own under the Homestead Act of 1866, which Blacks *were* eligible for. The demand to come to Oregon was always there; it was the *ability* to come to Oregon which was new. By preventing Blacks from coming to Oregon during the most significant years in the history of Oregon’s settlement, the state permanently inhibited the development of a large native-born Black population.

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As we celebrate the 175th anniversary of the opening of Barlow Road, let’s remember that this final leg of the Oregon Trail was not a path towards land and opportunity for *all* of its travelers. For Black pioneers, the Barlow Road represents just one of the many obstacles that marked the entire journey. And yet despite this, the handful of free and enslaved Black emigrants who traversed this road were --consciously or unconsciously-- challenging Oregon’s discriminatory laws. Their courage and resilience helped lay the foundation for today’s Black communities.