

# BLACK, WHITE & BEYOND

*An Interactive History*

AKRON'S  
MULTICULTURAL  
HISTORY

CLINTON  
THE PRESIDENT'S  
INITIATIVE ON RACE

COMING  
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HOME

## AFRICAN AMERICANS IN ANTEBELLUM OHIO

### Early Laws and Ordinances in Ohio

The issues of slavery and African Americans emerged at the forefront of Ohio's process of moving from territory to state. Ohio was the first state created out of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and while the Ordinance made slavery illegal in the new territories, escaped slaves were to be returned to their owners. During the first territorial assembly in 1799, a group of Virginian migrants petitioned to allow slavery in the new territory, but it was rejected, not so much on moral grounds as it was that representatives did not want free labor to compete with slaves. Again when the state constitutional convention met in 1802, the issue of free blacks in Ohio came to debate. There were only 337 in the entire Northwest Territory at the time, but white leaders remained concerned over how to address the black population. The issue of allowing slavery in the new state was rejected, but the assembly failed by one vote to allow black men the franchise. A tie vote left the assembly deadlocked until the President of the Convention, Edward Tiffin, voted against the franchise. Then, in 1804 and again in 1807, the Ohio General Assembly passed a series of "black laws" designed to discourage African Americans from settling in the state and to regulate the behavior of those already there. Among other things, African Americans had to post a \$500 bond upon entering the state to prove they could support themselves and not be a burden to the state, and present evidence of free status.

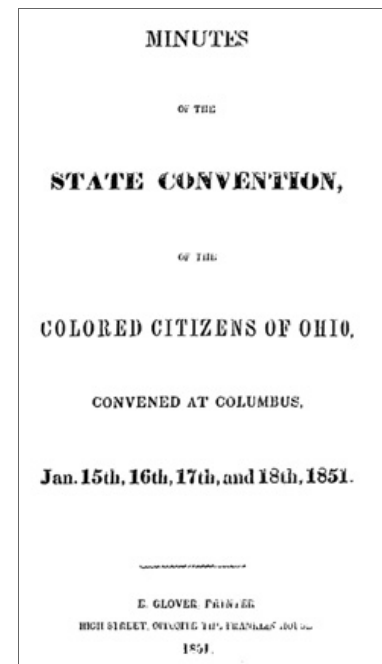
### Education and Employment for African-Americans

Education in Ohio remained unorganized and unregulated until the 1840s. A new state system came into being in 1849, modeled on the Akron School Law of 1847, which established school boards, tax systems to pay for public school systems, school districts based on geography, and a graded system of advancement. African Americans and mulattoes were not taxed because their children were not legally allowed to attend the new public schools in Ohio. In Akron, Cleveland and other northern Ohio cities, African American children were so few that white community members did not feel they posed a threat and these children were permitted to attend public schools. Meanwhile, blacks in Cincinnati and Columbus managed to collect funds to operate their own schools.

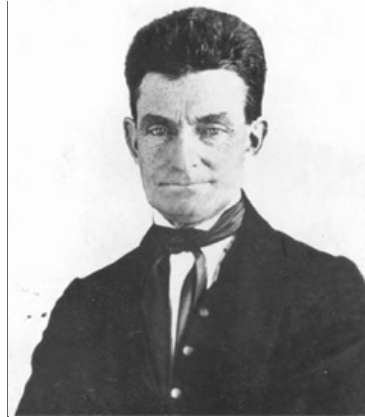
In 1853 the state modified the law to require boards of education to provide schools for black children in districts where more than twenty lived. Not surprisingly, on the eve of the Civil War Ohio's Commissioner of Public Schools studied African-American schools across the state and reported that black schools were grossly unequal to white schools.

In higher education, more options for blacks existed. Oberlin College, created in 1833, accepted African-American students starting in 1835. Oberlin actually sought out African-American students because many of the students were vehemently anti-slavery, and many of these students transferred from Cincinnati's Lane Seminary because of a conflict of slavery and abolition. Antioch and Otterbein also became co-racial and black students attended Western Reserve and Ohio University in the 1820s.

Click on an image below to enlarge and learn more:



In addition to education, blacks faced discrimination in employment as well. Many freed African-Americans with skills could not find work pertaining to their field because of racism, and these conditions forced many to work as menial laborers. Even though there was competition between free African-Americans and white Americans, it eased up with the racialization of various jobs. These jobs became a black person's job, and most whites would not take these positions. This eased job competition, but it also kept African-Americans in the most poorly paid jobs with the least respect given and skill needed. In the Western Reserve, however, many African-Americans enjoyed more open opportunities in jobs and education. It was more likely to find a prosperous African-American family profiting by skilled or educated labor in the northern Ohio counties than most other places in the nation. This is again attributed to the stronger antislavery viewpoint of the New England settlers of the region.



### Religion and the African-American community

After the American Revolution African-American communities and independent churches spread quickly throughout the newly acquired territories of the Northwest Territory. The African Methodist Episcopal Church was the leading ecclesiastical organization for Ohio's African-Americans, and there is conjecture that many African-American church efforts were linked to the Underground Railroad. And, like many white Ohioans in the Western Reserve, African-Americans in the Western Reserve had ties to the Quaker, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches through the Underground Railroad. Often African-American churches in Ohio were not strong, large, or organized enough to have a strong presence to protect the African-American community from racism, segregation, or the consequences of the black laws. Indeed, in Akron, the first black church was not established until after the Civil War. Until then, blacks often met in homes or other institutions for worship. Part of the reason is that the black population of Akron was small, numbering 73 in 1850, but decreasing to only 24 by 1860 as residents may have fled the area after passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

### The Abolition Movement and African-Americans in Ohio

The Abolition and Antislavery movements were strong in Ohio, especially in the Western Reserve with its close cultural and affinities with New England. The Ohio Antislavery Society formed in 1835 with local chapters in northeast Ohio. Underground Railroad activity was also substantial in Akron and the region. Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches held sway over large congregations and these were often centers of movement on the Underground Railroad, joined by the Quakers and other peace denominations. Both blacks and whites worked to bring slaves into freedom; Cleveland's John Malvin is perhaps the most famous African American from the region who used his canal boat to ferry slaves along the Ohio & Erie Canal.

Of course, white Ohioans remained divided over the question of black equality. Especially in the southern part of the state, sympathy for the South remained stronger and whites there opposed the activities of antislavery advocates and abolitionists. At the state constitutional convention in 1851, white fears were made clear when the assembly again rejected the franchise for black men, this time by a vote of 66 to 12. Blacks held their own state convention the same year in Columbus in an effort to persuade the Ohio assembly to allow black men to vote.

Two important figures to the Abolition Movement worked in Akron. Sojourner Truth was a freed slave from New York and she was at a women's rights meeting in Akron in 1851 when she stood up in the crowd and gave her famous "Ar'nt I a Woman" speech. While her speech linked African-American rights with women's rights, it did not create a unified front between women fighting for the right to vote and abolitionists fighting to end slavery. Moreover, there were also divisions among those fighting for emancipation of slavery and equal rights for African-Americans and others for emancipation,

but African-American colonization out of the United States. Leadership issues, cooperation between black and white leaders, the role of women, franchise, emigration, and nationalism all created a fissured Abolition Movement immediately prior to the Civil War.

The second figure in Akron was John Brown who lived in Hudson and later Akron. In 1844, Brown worked for Simon Perkins in the wool trade. He zealously fought for African-American emancipation, but his methods were condemned by many abolitionists and Americans above and below the Mason-Dixie line. John Brown led a raid at Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas and later on Harper's Ferry. Brown forfeited his life for these actions, but Ohioans, especially in the Western Reserve, celebrated and commemorated his actions. His execution was a battle cry for zealous abolitionists and a cry to end the system of slavery immediately.

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