

History of Blacks in Hastings

Part 1

1857 to 1870

In September 1857 a Minnesota Territory census named and counted inhabitants in preparation for statehood.

Hastings census count was 1,983 people. One of them was “colored”. He was Robert S. Burns a 32 year old, single barber from North Carolina. According to the occupation listing on the census, Robert was not only the only black man in Hastings, but also the only barber.

July and August before the census, delegates from the Democratic and Republican parties throughout the territory had gathered up river in St. Paul for the constitutional convention. Each party caucused separately and wrote their own version of a state constitution. Partisanship blocked progress, with black suffrage being the barrier to compromise.

Passions reached such a pitch that delegates began doubting whether an agreement could be reached. An encounter between Democratic delegate Gorman and Republican delegate Wilson resulted in physical battery. Gorman, who had argued for compromise, broke his walking stick over Wilson’s head during a confrontation in the committee room.

The Democrats’ version of the constitution denied blacks all right of citizenship. Though several Republicans argued in favor of equality for the black man, the majority of the delegates chose to leave black political rights for a later time. Thomas Foster, Dakota County delegate from Hastings, said, “I am willing to consent to admit the word ‘white’ in the Constitution, for I do not believe that the people are quite up to the highest mark of principle; the force of prejudice is yet so great among them...Minnesota should not be delayed from coming into the Union at the earliest possible moment.”

The compromise reached in this highly charged dispute directly affected Robert’s future. Seven years later the question of Black suffrage would resurface and he would play an active role in an effort to change the 1857 constitution. Joining him in this effort would be another black man and barber named Andrew Jackson Overall. A.J. came to Hastings from St. Paul shortly after the 1857 census.

He was born in Indiana in 1817. The year before his birth, Indiana became a state and outlawed slavery in its Constitution. His father, James Overall, was a conductor in the Underground Railroad. He sheltered fugitive slaves and directed them to the next stop on their journey to freedom.

In 1854 A.J. married Lucinda Thurman, a minister's daughter, in Marion, Indiana. Their daughter Nina was born January 1857 in Indiana. She was an infant when her parents brought her to Minnesota Territory. In 1860 twins Clara and Clarence were born.

The family lived in back of the barber shop on the North side of 2nd Street between Vermillion and Sibley. Next door was John Johnson, a 27 year old Saloon Keeper from Virginia with his wife Eliza, 25 from Ohio, daughter Laura, 6, born in Ohio and three month old son John, born in Minnesota.

The evening of Jan. 4, 1864, the colored men of Hastings held a meeting to consider the feasibility of urging their claims to the rights of citizens. James Adams was elected president and J. H. Brooks & Amos Wadkins served as secretaries. It was resolved that R. S. Burns, J. H. Brooks and A. J. Overall be appointed as a committee to draft a petition to be presented to the legislature of Minnesota to further their rights. A. J. Overall had experience to draw upon for this project. In March 1842 he had served as a delegate from Indianapolis for the first Colored Convention.

In 1865 both houses of the legislature passed a bill that proposed an amendment to strike "white" from the suffrage provision. Charles Griswold from Winona, introduced three petitions, from Hastings, Winona, and Rochester, favoring black suffrage. These actions marked the first concerted effort by Minnesota's black population to secure its voting rights. Despite strong opposition from the Democrats, the bill passed both houses by a large margin.

However, the amendment was voted down by the people in spite of gubernatorial candidate William Marshall's strong support. It was on the ballot again in 1867 and again failed to win the vote of the public. Marshall stubbornly insisted on the measure. In 1868 he triumphed; the amendment was adopted by a majority of more than 9,000 votes. The law passed in Minnesota two years before the 15th Amendment passed nationwide.

1865 State Census taken in June, showed that Hastings had grown to 2,495 people. Fourteen of them were listed as colored. Robert S. Burns, had married Francis and they had a son George. Overall family had two more children, A. J., jr and Sarah. George Kennedy born in West Indies, wife Sarah Jane born in Philadelphia, George R. and Carolina had arrived between the 1860 Federal Census and state census of 1865..

August 1865 George Washington Daniels arrived in Hastings. He accompanied General William LeDuc's horses from Washington D.C. following the Civil War and was the first hired man at the new estate on Vermillion Street. He had been born a slave, escaped from the Confederate army and met LeDuc when he joined forces with the Union Army.

George married Cornelia Morgan from Prescott, Wisconsin on October 2, 1868 and lists George's birthplace as Rome, Georgia. Following their marriage they lived in a small house east of the Carriage Barn on the LeDuc property.

The following year Henry and Julia St. Clair moved into the neighborhood with their three children. Henry was a teamster and may have been Stephen Gardner's driver.

An account in the Hastings Gazette Jan 2, 1869 reports, "40 colored citizens from Hastings attended the celebration of the fifth anniversary of the Proclamation of Emancipation at Ingersoll's Hall in St. Paul. This people thus going out to celebrate the event which has so largely contributed toward their recognition is a strong argument in favor of the emancipation, and indicates that liberty of action is an inherent principle as common to the black man as to the white".

On Thursday, December 31, the evening trains to St. Paul from Hastings and the Minnesota Valley were filled to overflowing. The convention was called to order at 12:45 Friday, January 1, 1870.

Robert Banks the patriarch of St. Paul's black community spoke about the new nation born when black men were granted citizenship. He encouraged his brethren to be sober and orderly for they could not afford to be riotous. He further admonished them to read the papers - both sides - and strive to be well healed on national affairs. They should teach their children good manners, and to be respectful to old age. These things would be a great help to them throughout life. They should keep out of debt: it was easy to get into debt, but hard to get out.

The convention adopted the new constitution of the Sons of Freedom, an organization of colored men of the whole State. Its objectives were to help blacks in as many ways as possible, particularly in their jobs and trades.

Andrew Jackson Overalls served as chair of the resolutions committee for this event and both R. S. Burns and John Johnson served on the committee of 9 men from throughout the state.

The population of Hastings recorded in the 1870 Federal census was 3,458. There were 40 "colored" residents living in 12 households. States of birth listed for adults were: South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, West Virginia, Virginia, Indiana, Wisconsin and Missouri. There were now 4 barbers. Other occupations included teamster, hosteler, laborer, washerwoman and fireman in Saw Mill.

The next segment of this series will introduce the reader to some of the neighbors and friends who joined Robert Burns in making Hastings their home.

By Heidi Langenfeld