

Helena's Black Heritage Places Tour



Captain John Smith, State Street, Helena, 1891. MTHS Photo Archives 945-008.

Born in South Carolina c.1821, Smith boarded at the "White House," a two-story building at 118 South Main, near the intersection of State and South Main Streets, in 1891.

JUNETEENTH TOUR TRAIN TOUR

Introduction:

Black history in what would become Montana began in 1805, when the Lewis and Clark Expedition arrived with Corps member York, a man enslaved by William Clark.

African Americans have been a part of Helena history since the mid-19th century. The 1868 Helena City Directory indicates that four non-Indian men discovered gold at the Prickly Pear Diggings near present day Jefferson Montana in 1862 – and that the group included a Black man. Many individuals and families came to live and work in the Helena area soon thereafter. Helena boasted the largest Black population in the state during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This tour offers some insight to members of the city's African American populace over the past two centuries, as well as information about the political and social environments that influenced their interactions with the larger Helena and Montana communities.

1. Grafton Tyler Brown



Grafton Tyler Brown, a nationally renowned lithographer and painter of the West during the late 19th century, began his career in San Francisco, making the birds eye view maps and other intricate illustrations. By 1892, he focused on landscapes around Yellowstone and lived in a large home at **420 5th Ave** in Helena. A modern house now stands in its place.

2. Walter and Almira Dorsey Grocery. The Dorseys were among the most prominent Black families in Helena through the mid-20th century. They married in Helena in 1891, and ran a restaurant, first at 104 Broadway, then by 1896, at **114 N Rodney** – in a building that no longer stands.

3. 323 State Street:



In 1910, an African American man named James "Jim" Jackson lived in the one-story red brick house at **323 State Street**. Jackson lived in several homes in this neighborhood and in Reeder's Alley. Born in Maryland in 1872, he worked as a janitor and general laborer until his death in 1960.

4. Mack-Johnson House 314 Miller:

James Mack, a Black man from Kentucky, purchased, and possibly built, the one-story L-shaped white brick building at 314 Miller Street by 1888 by James Mack. Two African American families successively owned and occupied the home—those of James Mack and of Nancy Jackson-- during the heyday of the Black community in Helena.



Looking north across State St neighborhood, the Brick two-story duplexes stood along Ewing St., c 1885, Helena As She Was



Looking southeast from Firetower Hill, c. 1880s, Helena As She Was.

State Street neighborhood:

Numerous houses here, torn down in the late 20th century, housed Black families. A few houses associated with Black residents still stand – 213 S.

Ewing now 382 Cutler Street was home to Hattie Smith in 1910. This area – Miller, State, Ewing, and Warren Streets – was a bustling residential and commercial area in late 1800s and early 1900s. Newspaper editor **Joseph Bass** rented out three large brick houses, and actor **Jess Lee Brooks** lived here with his mother. The **South Side School**, the city's segregated school, stood near the intersection of Warren and State. In use by 1875, Helena's South Side School had its own building and teacher through 1882. Widowed **Eliza Mundy**, wife of Civil War veteran Lafayette Mundy, lived with their son Thaddeus at 112 Warren in 1900. She ran a boarding house for many years – located where the modern apartments are now.



Elizabeth Mundy, c. 1920.
Driver Family Collection



Henry Maxwell business, 108 Cutler, Helena, c. 1890s. Collection of Kennon Baird, Helena As She Was

5. Henry Maxwell Cleaning and Whitewashing Business

Henry P. Maxwell had a cleaning and calcimining (whitewashing) business at **108 E Cutler** – which stood where State/Cutler Street now yields into Cruse Avenue. His business – and his home next door – often served as a gathering place for Black organizations and events.



Much of Cruse Ave generally follows what was Water and South Jackson Streets. The **International Hotel**, (brick building in photo) employer of many Black Helenans, was located at the corner of State and Main.

6. Walter and Almira Dorsey First Helena Home, 21 South Jackson

The St Louis Hotel was on the west side of Jackson, just about exactly behind where the Windbag is now, and 21 South Jackson was a two-story building with rooms on the second floor. It connected to the St. Louis Hotel across the street via a covered wooden walkway.



7. Women's Businesses

At 204 S. Park, stood **Mrs. Stitt's Boarding House**, an establishment that advertised in the Green Book from 1939 - 1951. The Placer and the Capitol Court Motel also advertised in that guidebook for Black travelers.

Immediately next door, at 206 S. Park, **Laundress Dorothea (Dorothy M.) Miller** rented a building in 1930. She ran her laundry business from here through 1935.

114 South Park – parking lot: **Hattie Mitchell** lived a modest one-story house from around 1910 through 1930. Born circa 1874 in Louisiana, Ms. Mitchell worked as a domestic and laundress, and never married.

110 South Park – parking lot: **Anna Gordon**, born in Alabama c. 1870, lived here alone in 1930. She listed no occupation in the census. Twenty years earlier, she lived at 829 Dearborn.

8. Montana Plaindealer, 17 S. Main



Joseph Bass,
public domain.

Montana boasted three Black newspapers – two in Helena: *The Colored Citizen*, published in 1894, and *The Montana Plaindealer*. Housed in the second story of the St. Louis Block, *The Montana Plaindealer*, began publication in Helena in March 1906 and ceased in 1911, under the editorial direction of Joseph B. Bass. Each issue contained exhortations by the editor Bass promoting civil rights and highlighting economic opportunities for African Americans in Helena and across Montana.



Galen Block, 1937. The Ted Kirkmeyer Collection, Courtesy of Tom Mulvaney, Helena as She Was.

9. Galen Block, 14 1/2 South Main

At least three Black fraternal organizations occupied the **Galen Block at 14 1/2 South Main**: the Black Masons, the Bird Lodge No 11, and the Manhattan Club. The building offered lodging rooms too. In 1930, longtime Helena resident JEW Clarke boarded here. Clarke was a barber and a podiatrist, and had a storefront on Broadway. Robert "Row" Murrell moved to Helena in 1900, and worked as a coachman and later as a waiter and porter at the Montana Club. He moved to the Galen Block in 1915, and resided there for nearly fifty years.

10. Parchen Block at 106-108 Broadway.

This was the home and business of Harry and Ada Salsburg. Together the couple ran **Salsburg's Suitatorium**, a tailoring shop, for several years until 1910, when Harry died.

11. Montana Club 24 W Sixth



Julian Anderson. Photo from Golden Jubilee Edition: Recipes by the Master of Mixes

Since its original construction in 1893, the **Montana Club** served as employer to many African American people. Bartender Julian Anderson retired in 1953 after sixty years of serving club patrons. He hardly missed pouring a drink when the club burned down in 1903, despite the fact that his own son Harry caused the tragedy.

His daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Ad Banks, worked at the Club throughout their working lives. The Club boasted a superbly talented all-Black wait staff for many years.

12. J.P. Ball Studio, 137 North Main/LCG

Ball was born in 1825 in Virginia, probably a freeman. As a young man he learned daguerreotyping, and owned several studios across the country. He opened a busy daguerreotyping studio in Helena in 1887.

In 1894, J.P. Ball, Jr. edited a newspaper, *The Colored Citizen*, from the same 137 N Main location. *The Colored Citizen*, together with the *Plaindealer* and Butte's *The New Age*, was one of three African American newspapers to take root in Montana.

No longer standing, J.P. Ball's studio occupied the parcel immediately south of the Goodkind Block on Main St./ Last Chance Gulch. The two-story brick building appears at the right of this photo. David Poor Collection, Helena As She Was.



Grandon Hotel, c. 1890s, David Poor Collection, Helena as She Was

13. Grandon Hotel, Sixth and Warren

The **Grandon European Hotel**, together with the Merchant's Hotel on the corner of Warren and Broadway, the Harvey Hotel at 108 Grand, and the Atlantic House, often employed African Americans as stewards, porters, and waiters. The Grandon functioned until a fire destroyed it on March 14, 1968.

14. Original Governor's Mansion, 304 N Ewing St

Elenorah Johnson worked as a housekeeper and cook at the **Original Governor's Mansion**, and her husband Charles and son Theodore also worked doing odd jobs and as a houseboy, respectively. A second marriage for both, Elenorah and Charles both hailed from New York, but had arrived in Montana by 1885. In 1910, they lived at 527 8th Avenue with their five children.

15. William Woodcock business and house, 418 8th Ave corner of Davis and 8th



William Woodcock, with Alexander C. Botkin. MTHS Photo 941-192

William Woodcock was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1852, and arrived in Fort Shaw, Montana during the 1870s, as servant to Lieutenant Joshua W. Jacobs. By 1881, he, his wife Theresa, and their baby Blanche had settled in Helena where Woodcock got a job as servant to attorney Alexander Campbell Botkin. Two years later, Woodcock sued a Butte restaurant under the Civil Rights Act of 1875, claiming that he had been denied equal privileges. The Deer Lodge District Court ruled in his favor in December 1883, and awarded him \$500.

16. Miles York House, 712 8th Ave

Miles York bought the house at 712 8th Ave in 1901 – the white stucco house with red trim. He, his wife Alice and their eight children lived here for eight years. York worked as a porter in several Helena establishments. When they sold the house in 1909 and moved to 515 Idaho, Miles began working as a barber and then a dry cleaner. His business was located downtown, at 11 Edwards Street, then 127 N Broadway. Both buildings were demolished during Urban renewal.



Miles York, Clothes Cleaning, Tailoring and Shoe-Shining, An Early African-American Business in Helena. Courtesy Tom Mulvaney, Helena As She Was.



Walter Dorsey and daughters, c. 1905. MTHS Photo PAC 74-104.266GP

17. Dorsey Grocery and Home, 900 8th Avenue

In 1904, Walter and Almira Dorsey purchased the lot at 900 8th Avenue, and two buildings – the store and the house. They had the structures moved to the location and joined together. The substantial property reflected the Dorsey family's prominence in Helena's African American community. Walter Dorsey died December 31, 1907. Almira continued to run the business for the next 25 years.

18. Polly and George Lee Residence, 912 8th Avenue

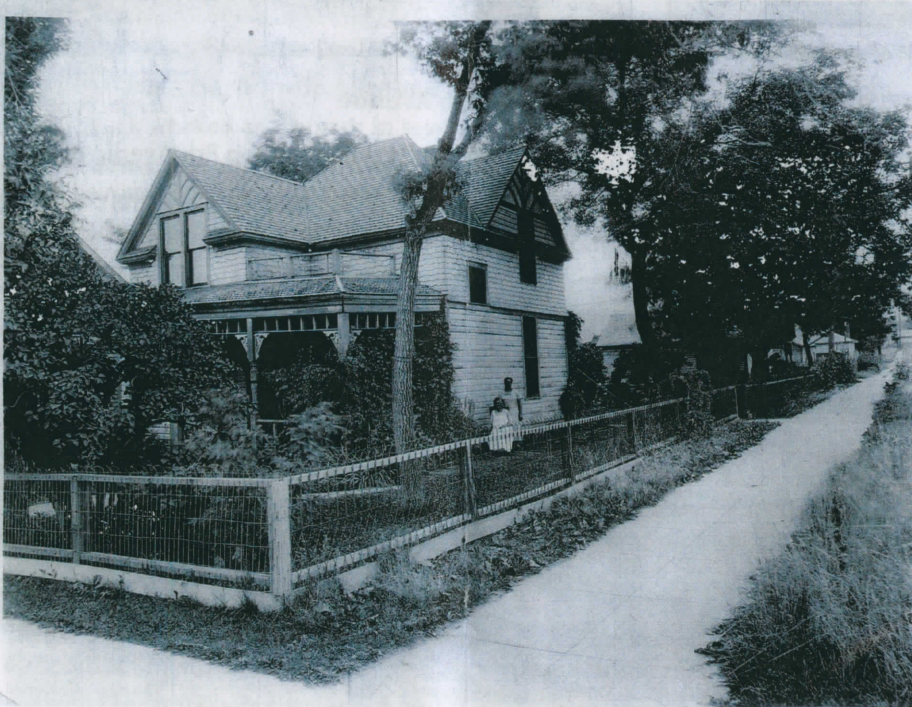
Polly Lee purchased the home in 1907. The family would own and occupy the property for several years after Polly's 1926 death.

The Lee family included Missouri-born Polly and her South Carolina-born husband George M., along with their Montana-born sons George Jr. and Alfred Julian. George Sr. held jobs as a steward and porter, Polly ran her dress making business from her home, son George, Jr. waited tables at the Montana Club and later worked a chauffeur. By 1920, Alfred Julian attended Howard University, historically Black Howard University in Washington, D.C.

19: Crump Residence, 1009 9th Ave

James and Clarissa Crump, and five subsequent generations of their family, lived at 1009 Ninth Ave. Both James and Clarissa were active members of the Helena community and the AME Church. James was a member and founder of several fraternal and business organizations. Clarissa was a founding member of the Pleasant Hour Club, the local chapter of the Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs.

The couple built this house in 1883, and it served as a gathering place for the whole African American community. Clarissa's great grandson, Ray Howard, was a much beloved figure in Helena - in his youth he was a high school basketball star. He traveled outside Montana and received his PhD, but could not find a teaching job in MT. He was able to return for his retirement years, and served as family historian. The garage housed family members and Black Helena renters for years.



*Clarissa Crump seated in her yard at 1009 9th Ave, undated.
Crump family photo.*

20. St. James AME Church, 114 N. Hoback St.

Organized in 1888, members of St. James African Methodist Church built this church building in 1889. It served as a center for worship, but also as a meeting space for clubs, lectures, events, and education. It was one of the oldest AME churches in the Pacific Northwest, and the first of seven built in Montana. Butte, Anaconda, Great Falls, Missoula, Havre, and Billings also boasted AME churches. At the turn of the 20th century, the St. James Literary Society, under the leadership of Walter Dorsey, Mrs. Eugene Baker, and Joseph Clark, counted over 100 participants at its weekly meetings. The society provided Black Helenans with a forum for discussion of community issues, an audience for performing artists, and an opportunity for local poets, playwrights, and essayists to present their work. St. James continued to function through the 1930s, but after World War II it ceased to exist as a regular church organization.



Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Annual Meeting attendees, posed in front of the door of St. James AME Church, 5th Avenue and Hoback, Helena, Montana. taken July 19, 1929. L. H. Jorud, photographer, Helena, MT, MTHS Photo PAC 2002-36.3 .