

The legitimate question to put to any townsman used to be “*From where did you come?*” As you see Cedar Rapids would have been no exception. As word spread of the opportunities brought by the mills, the railroad and other industries, so came the people. Although the African American population was here before and after the Civil War, by the early 1900’s due to the railroads, hotels and mills, the numbers increased between 1900 and 1920 for several reasons. After the massive explosion of unknown origin in May 1919 destroyed the entire plant, the transfer of the Douglas Starch Works in December 1919 to Penick and Ford, a Shreveport Louisiana company, who brought workers familiar with their process to work with them.

In this same time period Buxton Iowa was thriving and became the largest coal mining town west of the Mississippi River. The railroad purchased all the Buxton coal, and Consolidated Coal Company (CCC) sent a team of agents to Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee to recruit black workers. Buxton had begun its decline after reaching its peak coal production in 1914. (with many families leaving Buxton as early as 1911) By the time the soldiers returned in 1919, the population was estimated at only 400. (In 1905 Buxton’s citizens consisted of 2,700 blacks and 1,991 whites). The history of several Oak Hill families can be traced to families from Buxton Iowa.

The question about a segregated cemetery is always asked. As you can see, we find no record of Oak Hill Cemetery being divided in that manner. Possible reasons for this include the influence of Gabriel Carpenter and Sampson Bever. Mr. Carpenter, one of the co-owners and developer of Oak Hill Cemetery and Mr. Bever, another key developer of the area both arrived in Cedar Rapids from Pennsylvania. The first state to abolish slavery was Pennsylvania in the year 1780. Another family with a strong, longer lasting association to Oak Hill Cemetery was that of John and Mary (Weare) Ely. The Weare, Daniels and Ely family members took an active role in the development of the cemetery for several generations. As abolitionists, Mr. and Mrs. John F. Ely deeded the land for the Bethel A.M.E. Church to be built in the 1870’s

You will see definite areas for many ethnic groups, as tradition tells us, people select their burial location, based on wanting to be close to those who lived in the same neighborhood, worked in the same places, belonged to the same church, were involved in the same organizations or held the same traditions as your family did.

*The African American History Tour  
has been sponsored by:*



**African American Museum of Iowa**



CEDAR MEMORIAL



**Oak Hill Cemetery Association**

1705 Mt. Vernon Rd. S. E.  
Cedar Rapids Iowa

*Oak Hill Cemetery is non-profit lot owner association dedicated to preserving the heritage of Linn County, Iowa.*

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# *African American History at Oak Hill Cemetery*

*Oak Hill Cemetery invites you to  
Explore your Place in History*

*It is impossible to include the story of everyone buried at Oak Hill Cemetery at this time,  
but if your family has a special story to share please let us know for inclusion in future maps.*

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1705 Mt. Vernon Rd. S. E.  
Cedar Rapids Iowa



**William Oliphant – Block 62 Lot 50**

Born in Alabama in 1892, he was the last surviving member of his family in the Cedar Rapids area. His family came to Cedar Rapids when he was a young boy. Oliphant was well known in baseball circles, having played with semi-pro teams and in sandlot circles here. A lover of horses, he was for many years, an attendant in the Montrose stables and traveled over the United States with the Montrose horses. He specialized in the training and care of jumping horses and was an expert rider. He had also boxed professionally. Prior to his retirement because of ill health, he was the janitor at the police station.

**Richard Gomer– Block 142 Lot 1271**

Richard Gomer was a member of Company 54 Mass. Infantry. Led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the Fifty-fourth was made up of free Blacks including the sons of Frederick Douglass, who were instrumental in the formation of the unit. On July 18, 1863, the regiment won undying glory by leading the bloody assault on Fort Wagner near Charleston, South Carolina. In the attack nearly half the regiment was killed, wounded or captured. Colonel Shaw was among those who died. The survivors of the Fifty-fourth went on to participate in the eventual capture of Fort Wagner several weeks later. This company was the inspiration for the movie *Glory*

**Amelia Jackson Culp –**

As a charter member of the Bethel A.M.E. Church she filled every office in that institution. For four years she had been a missionary in Africa and on her return she spent time lecturing.

**Susan E. Pugh – Block 10 Lot 4 SG 13**

Susan E. Pugh was born into slavery in Caldwell Co. Missouri in 1860. As a deaconess of Bethel A. M. E. church she was also a member of the Colored Federated Women's Club. One of the first women drawn for jury duty in Linn County, Mrs. Pugh believed that she was the first Negro woman on an Iowa jury.

**Charles Pugh – Block 10 Lot 4 SG 13**

As a young man, Mr. Charles Pugh worked for a doctor in Missouri, who passed on his interest in politics to the young man. Charles would later be appointed deputy sheriff under Sheriff A. J. Allen of Decatur County. Mr. Pugh was a barber in Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa for more than 35 years. He once opened a shop of his own on Tenth Street SE, when he felt the prices at the “uptown shops” were too high.

**Herman C. Howard – Block 11 Lot 3 SG 8**

Born in Paducah Kentucky on February 2, 1891. As resident of Cedar Rapids for 45 years, he worked as a porter at the Union Station for 15 years. (Many others worked for the Railroad, and the Hotels and service industries in the downtown area)

**Charles H. Henderson – Block 51 Lot 3**

One of several known Oak Hill Cemetery burials with the distinction of “Born into slavery, Died Free”. Charles H. Henderson who was born and reared as a slave in Alabama and who could remember the Civil War, died at his home in Cedar Rapids at the age of 103. Mr. Henderson, who was married seven times, lived in Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas before coming north. He came to Cedar Rapids from Davenport about 21 years before his death. He spent his time working at odd jobs, and caring for his small apartment building.

**Cecil Reed – Block 180**

The Reed family moved to Iowa with his father’s railroad job about the time of World War I. He graduated from high school in Cedar Rapids, worked as a shoeshine boy, then as a cook, waiter, and bartender. At some point he opened and operated a broiler chicken processing plant. In 1949 he became the first African American Chamber of Commerce member in the state of Iowa. Cecil Reed, the first African American and only black Republican elected to the Iowa House of Representatives was 50 when the federal Civil Rights Act was signed into law in 1964. An experience when the Reed family took a trip west, and were refused them lodging lead to the 1953 opening of the Sepia Motel on the Lincoln Highway. The motel accommodated everyone and many Black entertainers took advantage of this area as it was the only Motel/Hotel where they were welcome.

**Dorothy Robinson – Block 182 Lot 14**

Dorothy Robinson was the first black nurse to work in a Cedar Rapids hospital. Encouraged to pursue nursing by her mother, who died when Dorothy was 5, she graduated in the 1930's from Provident hospital Nursing School with better than a “B” average. When she returned to Cedar Rapids to get a job, she was told the only position open was for a cleaning lady on the 3rd floor. Robinson did domestic work to earn money while seeking a nursing position. In between domestic jobs she would receive work that involved patient care. She helped new mothers at home, and cared for a patient with pnemonia. Seven years later, a nursing supervisor at St. Luke’s contacted her with an offer of general duty nursing. She worked there, taking a brief break from 1952 to 1958 to be near family in California, returned to Cedar Rapids and worked at St. Luke's until 1978, retiring as head of urology. She was quoted as saying “Being first was not easy, but there wasn't anything that couldn't be taken care of.” In the mid 1970's she was a panel member for community affairs to bring harmony between the black and white races. She was quoted as saying she never thought of herself as a pioneer, but “I opened the doors”.

**George Russell Collins – Block 180 Lot 75**

George R. Collins became one of Coe College's greatest athletes in the early 1920's. A halfback, Mr. Collins starred on both offense and defense winning All-state and Midwest honors. He also played on the baseball team. Graduated from Coe in 1923, he was active in the Clan of “C” organization of Coe athletes. He was a teacher and coach before entering the mail service. A mail carrier in Cedar Rapids for 16 years, he had a downtown route and was known by scores of people for his efficiency and friendliness. He was greeted daily by many people who has seen him play football on 3 of Coach Moray Eby's greatest teams at Coe.

**Dr. William H. Beshears – Block 180 Lot 88**

Born October 12, 1897 in St. Joseph Missouri, to Strothers and Georgia Beshears. City Directories list his practice as located at 323 S 2nd Street in 1918. As a World War I veteran, there is no entry for 1919 but his practice resumed at that location in 1920. During his lifetime he served as President of the NAACP, and was a member of the Masons. He was a practicing dentist at the time of his death in 1958.

**Viola Gibson – Block 179 Lot 80**

Viola Gibson was a resident of Cedar Rapids from age 9 to her death in 1989. She was educated in the Cedar Rapids public schools, was trained as a practical nurse, and worked as a Red Cross home nursing instructor. Spurred by the denial of access of African Americans to the Ellis Park Pool, Mrs. Gibson helped to resurrect the Cedar Rapids chapter of the NAACP in 1942. She served on the Cedar Rapids-Marion Human Relations Council and led a campaign to convince the Iowa congressional delegation to support the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

**Henrietta Washington – Block 132**

**Lot 2**  
All that is known is a small notation in the death register that follows:  
*Colored woman brought to this county by Geo. W. (M.?) Clarkson(?) with whom she lived for many years. Lately on the William Stewart farm.* This was followed by the death date of September 18, 1881. There is no marker on the lot, and nothing else to tell her story. An 1850 Census record lists her as 21, female, from Virginia. Although Ellen Taylor was the first black woman in the city, Henrietta Washington may have been the first in Linn County.

**Obadiah B. Clare– Block 156 Lot 1314**

An African American born in New York in 1851, he moved to Cedar Rapids in 1880. On October 9, 1880 he received a patent for his invention, a trestle that could be folded compactly and easily transported and set up to support heavy carpets for beating to remove dust.

**Marshall Perkins – Block 144 Lot 1280**

Marshall Perkins, son of a Virginia slave, was born February 25, 1862 in Palmyra Missouri. He operated the first black owned restaurant in Cedar Rapids for 44 of the 55 years that he and his wife Louisa lived in the city. Located on First Avenue between 2nd and 3rd Street SE, he decided on the name Marshall's since it was his first name and he thought it had more appeal than his last name. The Perkins family lived above the restaurant.

**Rev. Andrew Ford – Block 173 Lot 47**

Born June 29, 1845 on a farm adjoining that owned by George Washington Mount Vernon Va., he served in the Civil War with Company H, First Negro Infantry. Rev. Andrew Ford, with his wife, Romelier, served as the first associate pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Cedar Rapids when it was organized in 1871.

**Ellen Taylor Memorial –**

Born into slavery in Virginia, Ellen Taylor was the oldest and the first black settler in the city of Cedar Rapids. In 1862 an Iowa Infantry Company was sent to Missouri to confiscate “contraband” blacks off plantations. She arrived in Cedar Rapids in 1865. Her husband Johnson Taylor died before 1880. She had 4 daughters and was the great grandmother of Dr. Russell L. Collins.