

A CENTURY OF BLACK MORMONS

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NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

A narrative description of the project detailing how the project promises to benefit the scholarly and professional life of AAR members and the work of the region.

In the months leading up to the 2012 presidential election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, a few media outlets reinforced the public perception that Mormons (members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) were predominantly white. Reporter Jessica Williams from Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* interviewed five Black Mormons and then called them "mythical creatures, the unicorns of politics." She asked if the five whom she met comprised the entire population of Black people in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Susan Saulny, a reporter for the *New York Times*, similarly speculated in a *Times* online video that there were only a "very small number" of Black Mormons, a "couple of thousand max," or somewhere between "500 to 2,000." Likewise, Jimmy Kimmel asked on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, "Are there Black Mormons? I find that hard to believe." We propose to use an AAR Regional Grant to not merely answer these questions but to historicize them.

The questions that Kimmel, Williams, and Saulny asked in 2012 highlight the historical amnesia that dominates the public perception of one of the United States' home grown religions. It is a perception that is perpetuated by Mormonism's historical narrative

on the inside as well as misunderstandings on the outside. The irony lies in the historical evolution of that public perception. Black Saints were among the first to arrive in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and have been a part of the Mormon experience from its beginnings. In fact, public perception in the nineteenth century centered on the notion that Mormons were too accepting of undesirable racial groups. One accusation leveled against Mormons in the state of Missouri, for example, was that they had “opened an asylum for rogues and vagabonds and free Blacks.” The first documented Black person to join this American born faith was Black Pete, a former slave who was baptized in 1830, when the fledging movement was less than a year old. Other Black Saints trickled in over the course of the nineteenth century (more than 200 identified so far) and are woven into the Mormon story. At least two Black men were ordained to the faith’s highest priesthood in its first two decades. Yet by the beginning of the twentieth-century Mormons themselves had erased Black pioneers from their collective memory and solidified race based priesthood and temple restrictions in their stead. On the inside and on the outside Black Mormons were lost to history.

We propose to use the AAR’s Regional Grant to further develop and enhance an ongoing digital history database designed to document and recover what was lost—the identities of Black Mormons during the faith’s first one hundred years (1830 to 1930). The LDS Church has never tracked membership by race and so official LDS baptism and confirmation records are not useful. Yet documents do exist that have allowed me and two graduate research assistants to identify Black Mormons, name them, and collect basic biographical information about them. We will use this growing database to write a collective biography of Black Mormons and sketch the first demographic profile of a largely forgotten people.

Religious Studies scholar Julius H. Bailey notes that historians have primarily focused on the formation of independent Black churches as evidence of African American agency in the face of segregation and marginalization within predominantly white churches. In 1816, for example, the African Methodist Episcopal Church became the first independent Protestant denomination founded by Black people. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church followed a few years later. But what about those Black believers

who stayed in predominantly white churches and felt empowered? What about those who joined predominantly white churches and cast their lots with new religious traditions? Scholars have largely neglected their stories. In the case of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that is certainly true. My project seeks to address this gap and give voice to the forgotten Black Mormons of the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries.

The questions regarding Black Mormons are complex and are frequently stymied by a paucity of written sources from Black Mormons themselves. What does it mean to be twice marginalized—a member of a minority race within a suspect minority religion? Jane Manning James, a Black convert to Mormonism in the 1840s remembered in an autobiography written late in life that she joined the New Canaan Congregational Church in Wilton, Connecticut, when she was fourteen years old but she “did not feel satisfied.” She recalled, “it seemed to me there was something more that I was looking for.” She claimed to find it when Mormon missionaries passed through the region and baptized her. Within a few weeks she recalled, “the Gift of Tongues came upon me.” She then experienced other spiritual manifestations that confirmed her in her new faith. She was among the original pioneers to enter the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and would spend the rest of her life in Utah. Other members of her family joined Mormonism but most left before they died, likely in response to the shrinking space for full Black participation in their chosen faith. Some African-Americans joined Mormonism as slaves or were brought to Utah as slaves when their white masters converted. Others converted in the decades following the Civil War in such diverse places as Oakland, California; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Oshkosh Wisconsin; Tylertown, Mississippi; and Johannesburg, South Africa. What do census and vital records tell us about their lives that can add texture and color to a largely white Mormon narrative? What do Black Mormons teach us about the intersections between race, region, and religion in American history?

We have already begun research on a digital database of all known Black Mormons baptized into the faith between 1830 and 1930. To date we have identified over 200 individuals and the list continues to grow. With the assistance of two part-time graduate research assistants and a few volunteer researchers we are busy finding primary source documentation to substantiate their LDS membership and the biographical details of their

lives. Each name must go through a rigorous historical vetting process before being entered into the database. We are documenting their name, gender, date of birth, date of death, movement across time and space, evidence of LDS membership, subsequent faith transitions if any, evidence of LDS priesthood or temple participation (for those who managed to find ways around LDS racial policies), and status as free or slave for those who joined Mormonism before 1865. It is a time consuming process which requires significant attention to detail. The J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah has agreed to host the digital project and help to develop a user friendly and visually attractive interface built in Omeka S, a digital platform ideally suited to a project such as this. The resulting digital database will be a public history resource which will make the data and supporting primary sources publicly available to scholars and lay people alike. It will document a regional racial identity for Mormonism that was anchored in the American West but that developed racial offshoots both nationally and internationally.

It will include people such as William and Marie Graves, Black saints who first encountered Mormons when they met street-preaching missionaries in Oakland, California. In 1909 when William and Marie decided to marry, the officiant at their wedding was a Latter-day Saint missionary. His companion served as one of the witnesses. The relationship with the missionaries continued and two years later, in November 1911, the missionaries baptized and confirmed William and Marie as Latter-day Saints. In 1920, when the couple traveled to Georgia to visit friends, they sought out the Atlanta LDS congregation but were told that Black people were not welcome. "I never had nothing to hurt me like that in all of my life" Marie wrote. They returned to Oakland and continued to worship in the integrated congregation. These names and stories are mostly unknown, both within and without Mormonism, and will add texture and complexity to the sometimes fraught intersections between race and religion in America.

In doing so we will consider such variables as movement across time and space: How does a Black Mormon, born a slave in Virginia, end up buried in a cemetery in Parowan, Utah? What do the places of birth and death of Black Mormons tell us about nineteenth century mobility and migration? What are the average ages and gender profiles of Black Mormons when they joined Mormonism? How many Black converts stayed within

their new faith? How many were slaves at the time of conversion? Are there chronological and or geographical patterns to Black conversions? How many Black Saints participated in the LDS lay priesthood and temple rituals, despite the faith's evolving racial policies? Is there evidence of multi-generational Black families or do Mormonism's racial policies make it too difficult to pass the faith to the next generation? Interpreting the data with these and other questions will create the first scholarly analysis of what race and religion looked like in Mormonism during its pioneer century.

A public digital history project such as this is ambitious and suffers most from a lack of dedicated researchers. I propose to use the regional AAR grant to pay graduate student researchers to continue gathering primary source documentation and biographical information on the 219 Black Mormons identified thus far. As digital historian Tim Sherratt has explained, digital projects such as this are centered on finding people: "They are projects about finding the oppressed, the vulnerable, the displaced, the marginalized and the poor and giving them their place in history."

We will launch the database on June 30, 2018 with a projected thirty-five biographies and supporting primary sources loaded into the online site and made publicly available. Each biography includes a "document viewer" where primary source documents such as census records, LDS baptismal records, and other evidence will be made publicly available. The challenge following the public launch will be to continue adding biographies and their corresponding primary sources. The research and documentation are labor intensive, as is the data entry. The AAR grant will allow Century of Black Mormons to sustain itself over the following year and to add an estimated one hundred names to the database.

STATEMENT ON WHY THIS PROJECT IS REGION-SPECIFIC

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is headquartered at Salt Lake City, Utah and has long been an important religious force in the Intermountain West. Its fraught history with race has long been a subject of historical inquiry and has been a dominant facet of public perception of Mormonism in the region. To date, however, no historian has attempted to understand the Mormon racial story from the perspective of those who were

black and Mormon. This project is designed to address that gap and at the same time document the religious lives of little know black pioneers in the Intermountain West. While not all Black Saints in the database were baptized in the Intermountain West, or came to live there, a significant portion did. For those who did not, Salt Lake City still served as headquarters for their religious lives and the policies and practices that impacted their religious lives. In that sense, this project highlights the global reach of one of the Intermountain West’s American born faiths and illustrates one of the ways in which the region served as a center to its various peripheries.

In addition to its regional importance, Century of Black Mormons will be of use to scholars of Mormonism, African American religion, and missiology studies. Moreover, its significance is not limited to experts or to Latter-day Saints in the Intermountain West. We anticipate that the project’s data will be used to teach regional as well as national lessons in conjunction with courses on race and religion across the United States.

TIMELINE

A seed grant from the American Academy of Religion would allow us to fund research assistants to conduct archival research in libraries, university archives, and other repositories across the Intermountain West as well as to continue the data entry and website development. Upon receiving the grant, we will begin to expand the website to include sections on “where” black Mormons lived at the time of their baptisms, “when” the majority joined the faith, and “how many” there were (women, men, slaves at time of baptism) alongside other metrics that we are tracking. Over the course of one year, the grant will fund 150 graduate research hours and for a graduate student to maintain and expand the Century of Black Mormons database and corresponding public site. During the year of the grant we will be able to research, write, and upload an addition 100 profiles and supporting primary sources to the database and make them publicly available.

BUDGET

A detailed budget, including office expenses, travel expenses, honoraria, stipend, and other expenses. Please note that institutional overhead costs may not be included in this budget.

Graduate Research Hours	\$
Website Maintenance and Expansion	\$
TOTAL	\$