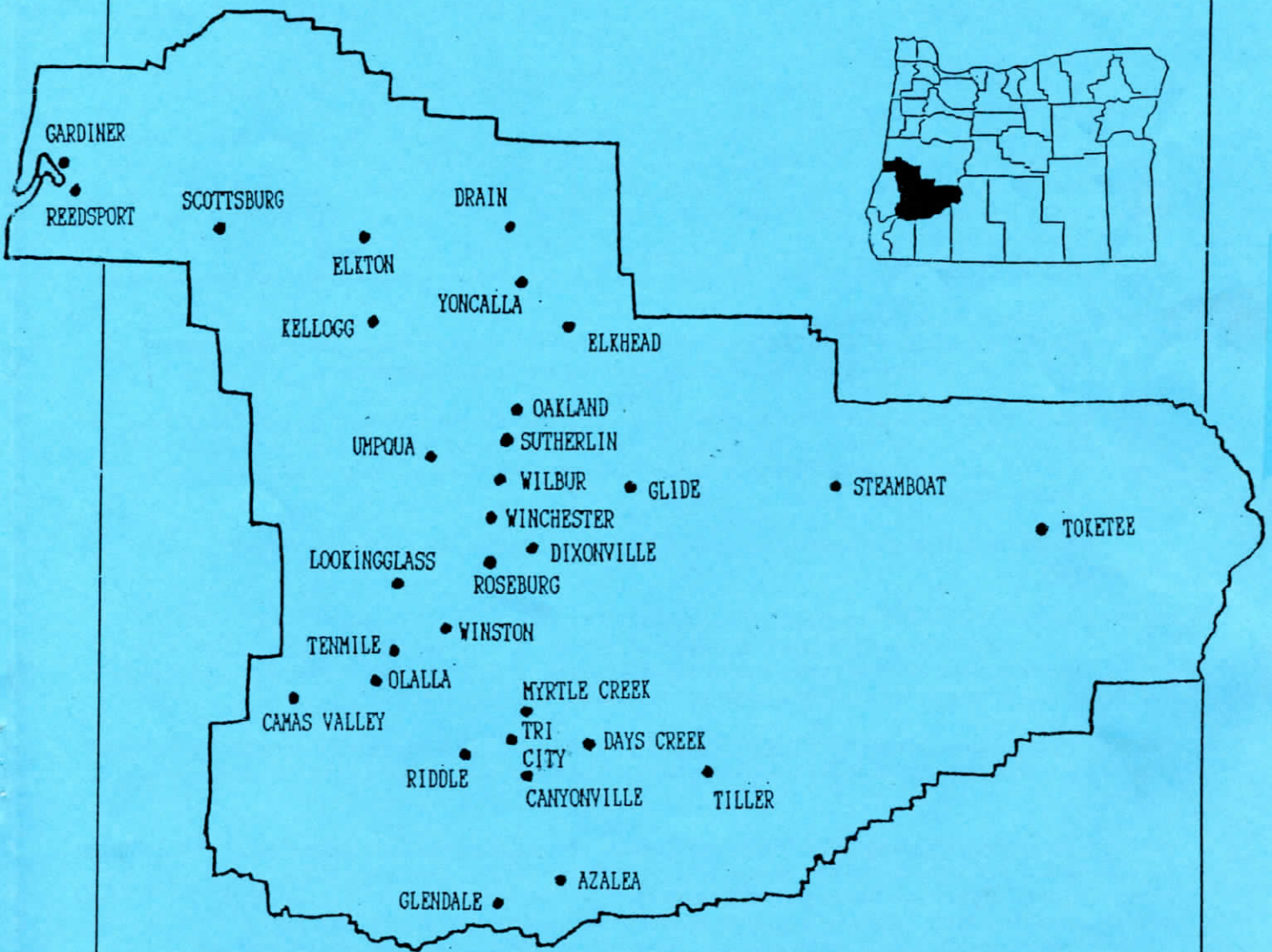


Douglas County Pioneer

June 2014, Volume 28, Issue 2



Genealogical Society of Douglas County, Inc.

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-OR-

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Douglas County Pioneer: Published quarterly in March, June, September and December. Unpublished genealogical material is accepted as it pertains to Douglas County, Oregon, queries, photos and Ancestor Charts are gladly accepted.

Research Fees: \$5.00 for simple requests, such as copies of obituaries or a few look-ups in our publications. Complex research requiring retrieval of actual documents and/or constructing family information is \$10.00 per hour. There may be additional copying costs; your email address would insure communication about them. Send your written requests to the address on the preceding page with "Research" noted over the address on the envelope. Please include a family group sheet with your request so we do not duplicate what information you already have. While we do answer email questions and requests telephone requests are very difficult to handle and are strongly discouraged.

Donations: Monetary gifts are always welcome and are tax-deductible. GSDC is a 501(c) a organization.

Douglas County Pioneer

**Douglas County, Oregon
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Note: This issue contains the same amount of pages, just a different numbering system.

Historically, the first issue of the year contains a list of all the publications the GSDC offers for sale. We do not publish this list in each issue.

The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County, Oregon
Part 1 – Who is Letitia Carson?

(*Douglas County Family Names: Bigham; Carson; French; Lavadour/Laverdure; McGinnis; Morrisette; Rondeau*).

Introduction: This is the first of a continuing series of articles exploring the history and genealogy of Letitia Carson, a Douglas County resident from the time of the Rogue River Indian Wars in the mid-1850's until her death, in 1888. Her son, Andrew J. "Jack" Carson, lived in Douglas County nearly his entire life; first arriving as a young boy with his mother in the 1850's, and living here until his death in 1922. Letitia's daughter Martha and her oldest grandchildren also lived in Douglas County for a good portion of their lives, before moving to Umatilla County in the late 1880's as members of the Lavadour family.

Part I of this series details my personal background and interest in Letitia and also gives a brief summary of her life -- and explains why she is about to become far more well known in Douglas County and through much of the western US later this year.

In February 1991, while attending classes at Oregon State University, I wrote a series of four weekly articles for the local *Corvallis Gazette-Times* newspaper in recognition of Black History Month. Each article featured an important black pioneer in Oregon history, and one of the articles was about a woman named Letitia Carson. A fellow OSU student, Janet Meranda, became very interested in Letitia's story, particularly as we later collaborated on an archaeological research project that included the Carson's original Benton County land and homesite.

After finishing the project, Jan convinced me that our research should be used to write an article about Letitia for the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, which I agreed to do and which has yet to be completed. But is still in the works. During the next 18 years or so, Jan would periodically remind me of my agreement and I would attempt to make a little progress toward keeping it. Then, about three years ago, Jan was able to convince noted historical novelist Jane Kirkpatrick to write a book about Letitia's life -- which also convinced me that I needed to get back to work on the article.

After completing another year of fairly steady research with Jan's assistance and insistence, and upon learning the actual history of Letitia's Homestead claim in Douglas County, I soon realized we would need to complete at least two articles instead of one; conduct far more research to complete them, due to all of the new leads and information we had obtained; and that a full-fledged book-length biography was needed, too.

Jane Kirkpatrick's 25th historical novel, *A Light in the Wilderness*, based on Letitia Carson's life, will be published in September 2014. Jan and I hope to be putting the finishing touches on Letitia's biography in 2015. Or 2016.

Timeline of Letitia Carson's life with significant dates highlighted:

Letitia Carson was born sometime from 1814 through 1818 as a slave in Kentucky. Nothing is known of her early life, or how she got to Missouri at some point before 1845. It is very possible she was involved in the hemp or tobacco farming industries, whether as a field hand or as a house servant. Or both. She most likely was a Baptist or a Methodist and may have attended Sunday services in her owner's church, or possibly with an all-black congregation; probably some of both.

In May 1845, Letitia began a 6-month journey across the Oregon Trail with David Carson, a 45-year old Platte County, Missouri landowner born in Ireland. David had most likely been raised as a Presbyterian in northern Ireland's Antrim County until he came to America with his older brothers and sisters and their families at age 18 or so, but he had been a Platte County "sooner" in the late 1830's -- when he obtained his 160-acre farm -- owned a town lot in Platte City, and had just become an American citizen in October of 1844. On June 9, somewhere near the crossing of the South Platte River, where the Oregon Trail begins to follow the North Fork, Letitia gave birth to the couple's first child, Martha Carson.

The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County, Oregon Part 1 – Who is Letitia Carson?

Soon after arriving in Oregon, the family of three settled down in a cabin they built on David's 640-acre Soap Creek Valley "Provisional Land Claim"; where they were increased to four members with the birth of son Adam ("Jack") in 1849. Oregon also became a Territory in 1849, and Territorial law regarding slavery and black citizenship immediately replaced the more restrictive provisional government laws. In 1850, the Oregon Donation Land Act reduced Carson's claim to 320-acres because Letitia was not legally David's wife (and could not thereby own an equal share of the previously claimed and adjacent 320 acres) -- but even so, couldn't have legally owned it anyway because she was black.

In September 1852, David died after a short illness, leaving Letitia and the two children behind. A rich neighbor, Greenberry Smith, soon had himself appointed Executor of Carson's estate and immediately declared that, as slaves, Letitia and the children were themselves property, and therefore not entitled as heirs. This was Oregon, though, so they weren't individually appraised or put up for sale as they would have been in Missouri.

During the next three years, at a time when slavery was a major political issue in both Oregon and in the United States, Letitia sued Smith twice in an effort to recover an equitable portion of David's estate for herself and her children -- and prevailed both times! These results were politically newsworthy, unprecedented, the hearings were attended by many prominent local and state citizens -- and yet were barely acknowledged in the local or state press at that time. And still, to this day, few people are aware of these events. Why that is can only be conjectured, but it is likely to change soon.

After David's death, and during the trials, Letitia left her Soap Creek home of seven years and moved to the upper Cow Creek valley in Douglas County. Here she served as a midwife to the Elliff family and was involved with the Rogue River Indian Wars that were taking place at that time. When she moved from Cow Creek (where she first lived in 1853 or so) to South Myrtle (where she lived by 1864) is unknown.

On August 17, 1857, Oregon adopted its Constitution, including that it was illegal for black citizens to own land in Oregon or to marry white citizens. Also, slavery was illegal. Oregon remains the only state constitution in the US to have been adopted before acquiring actual statehood, or to include racial exclusionary laws among its resolutions.

On February 14, 1859, Oregon became a State and formally adopted its 1857 Constitution. Letitia and her children -- possibly by design -- are not found in 1860 census records, although they most likely continued living in Douglas County during that time. It is very possible that she had a fair amount of savings, both from her court judgments in Benton County, and from her likely domestic services for travelers along the California Road, local landowners, successful miners, government roadbuilders, and other possible income sources.

On April 12, 1861 the American Civil War began.

May 20, 1862. The Homestead Act -- "An Act to Secure Homesteads for Actual Settlers on the Public Domain" -- was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln.

January 1, 1863. Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all slaves in the US.

June 17, 1863. Martha is 18 and pregnant, Jack is almost 14, and Letitia Carson files a Homestead Act claim for 160 acres on South Myrtle Creek in Douglas County, Oregon. Letitia files as a "widow" and single mother of two children; although the Act includes "freed slaves," she doesn't identify herself as such.

On November 26, 1864, Letitia's first grandchild of record, Mary Alice Bigham, is born.

April 15, 1865. Lincoln assassinated.

The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County, Oregon Part 1 – Who is Letitia Carson?

January 19, 1868. Martha Carson marries Narcisse Lavadour, whose family had settled a few miles south of the Carsons on an old Indian townsite, present-day Milo.

June 19, 1868. Letitia Carson's Homestead claim is certified. She is among the very first 71 people in the entire US so recognized, and perhaps as high as No. 14 on that list. She is also the only black woman in Oregon known to have successfully completed such a claim, and one of a very few such black women across the entire US, despite totals of more than 3 million applicants and 1.6 million successful claims before the Act ended in 1934.

Letitia lived another 20 years on her land. Her daughter Martha and her eldest granddaughter, Mary Alice, married Lavadour brothers and raised their children a short distance from her farm, where she became a grandmother and great-grandmother.

In the summer of 1887 the two Lavadour-Carson families moved to the Umatilla Reservation, in large part to take advantage of the new "Dawes Act" Allotment claims that could be made on the reservation during that year. Jack stayed behind with his mother, not being qualified to claim an allotment and likely not that interested in moving in any instance, and Letitia deeded her land to him.

In February 1888, Letitia died and was buried a few miles from her Homestead, on the Benjamin Stephens Donation Land Claim, in the Stephens family graveyard.

Martha and Mary Alice Lavadour provided Letitia with many grandchildren and great-grandchildren -- ancestors to several accomplished artists, leaders, and members of the Confederated Umatilla Tribes to this time. Jack never married or had children and apparently lived with his mother for much of his adult life. He died in 1922 and is buried in the Stephens graveyard, next to his mother.

3. Questions for Genealogical Society members:

- 1) Do any of Letitia's apple trees still exist from her 1887 orchard on South Myrtle Creek?
- 2) Mary Alice Bigham kept her father's surname until she was married. Does anyone know (or can find out) if she was raised by her mother's family or her father's family? She is listed as 5/16 Indian and her mother Martha is listed as white and living together in the 1880 census.
- 3) Lavadour family members were French Canadian-Walla Walla trappers, miners, and farmers that are the namesakes of Lavadoure Creek, Lavadoure Grange, Lavadour Gap, and (maybe) Lavadour School in Douglas County. Are there any known photographs of this family in local archives or museums that were taken in Douglas County before 1888?

Illustration #1 of 2 w/caption.

Next: Part II. Letitia Carson and the Rogue River Indian Wars, 1853-1855.

The author, Bob Zybach, has a PhD from Oregon State University in Environmental Sciences. He has been Program Manager for Oregon Websites and Watersheds Project, Inc. (www.ORWW.org), a nonprofit 501 c (3) educational organization based in Philomath, Oregon, since 1996.

The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County, Oregon
Part 1 – Who is Letitia Carson?

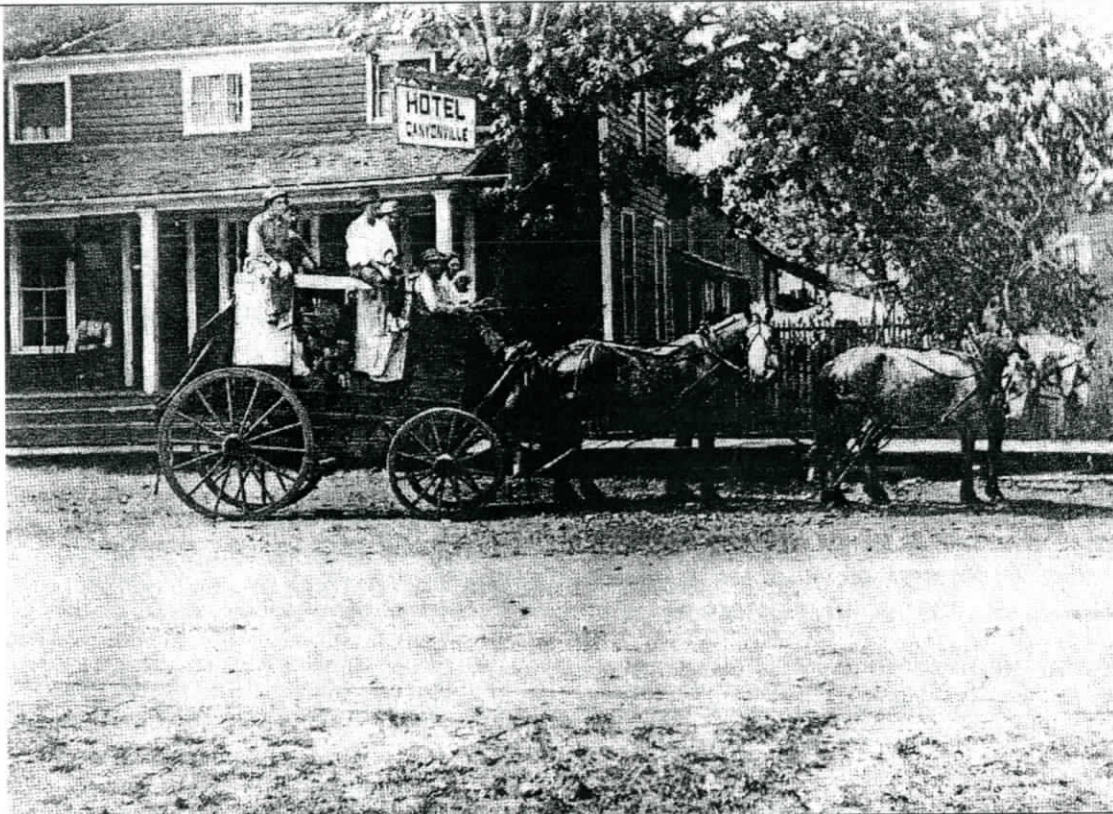


This is the draft cover of the biography of Letitia Carson that I am coauthoring with Janet Meranda. The woodcut is copyrighted by Alison Saar and used by permission of L.A. Louver, Venice, California.

In September, popular author Jane Kirkpatrick will be releasing her 25th novel, *A Light in the Wilderness*, which is also based on Letitia's life.

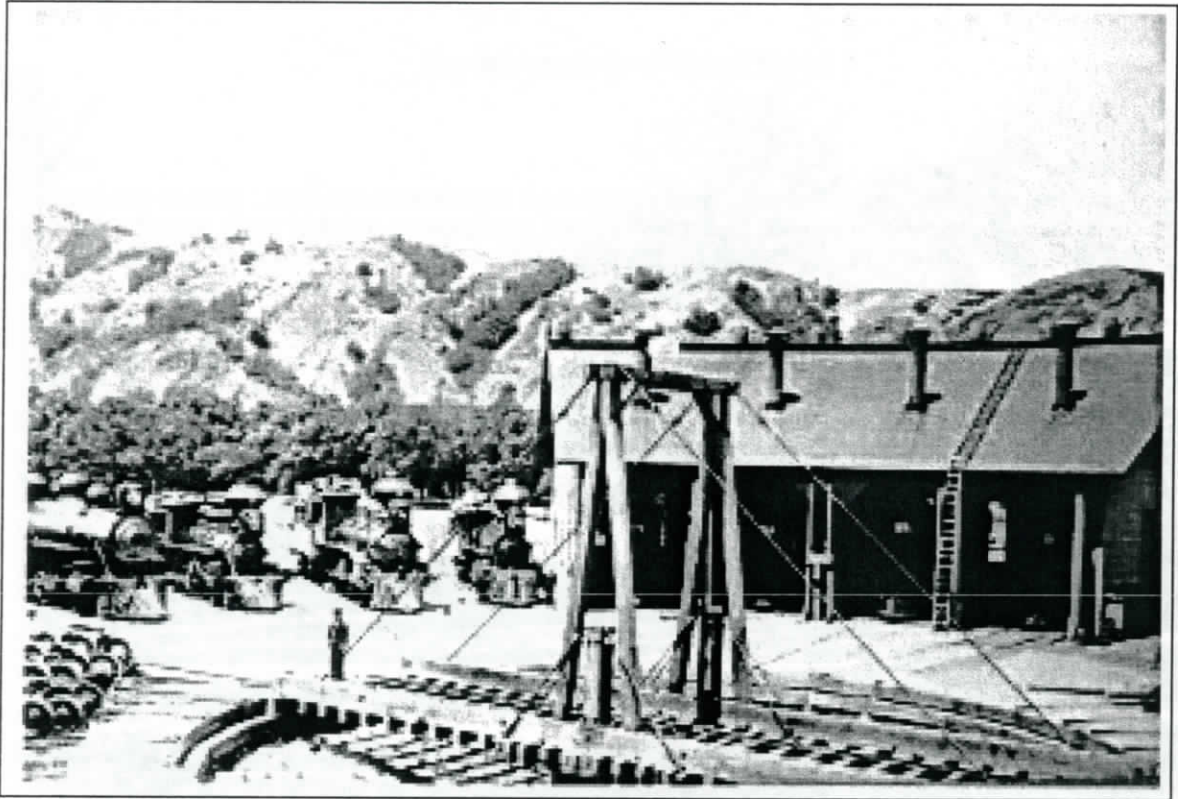
Here is where to learn more:

http://www.orwww.org/History/Letitia_Carson/



Caption: This photograph was taken in 1912 and was first published in Stephen Dow Beckham's *Land of the Umpqua: History of Douglas County* (p. 127). The driver appears very likely to be Jack Carson, and Beckham has agreed that it is a good possibility. It is also possible that some of the passengers are Carson's relatives, either from Upper Cow Creek or visiting from Umatilla County. The original photo is at the Douglas County Museum in Roseburg.

Submitted by Bob Zybach



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