

Barney Ford Came to Denver

By Dennis Payton Knight

He was born a slave in Virginia in 1822, and given but one name, Barney. His mother was a slave woman named Phoebe, his father the white plantation owner. With his mother's help, he taught himself to read and write, and as a teenager found himself toiling on a Mississippi riverboat. In 1848, he escaped by simply walking off the boat at Quincy, Illinois. With help from the Underground Railroad made it to Chicago.

He was still only Barney then, but when he saw two interesting names on a locomotive, he became Barney Launcelot Ford. In Chicago, he became a barber and met his future wife in 1849.

Ford decided in 1851 to go to California with his wife to prospect for gold. It would have been dangerous traveling overland as a runaway slave, so they booked passage from New York City around Cape Horn. They stopped at Nicaragua, where he opened the United States Hotel and Restaurant.

His hotel business was a success, but it was lost during a civil war in Nicaragua, so the Fords returned to Chicago to run a livery stable which was also a station on the Underground Railroad.

In 1860 Ford again got gold fever and decided to try his luck in Colorado. Learning he was not allowed as an African American to stake a claim, he instead settled in Denver and opened a barbershop. He rented the building at 1514 Blake Street, which burned down, so the next year he borrowed \$9,000 and built a two-story structure on the site, his People's Restaurant and Bar occupied the first and second floors, with a barbershop and hair salon in the basement. A third story was added in 1892, and the building, now known as the Barney L. Ford Building, is on the National Register of Historic Places. Hapa Sushi occupies it now.

When Colorado sought statehood in 1865, Ford went to Washington to lobby against it because its proposed constitution barred African Americans from voting. He then fought for the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which would give negroes the right to vote, and, after it passed in 1870, he supported Colorado statehood. Colorado reached statehood in 1876.

By the 1870s Barney Ford was one of the wealthiest men in Colorado, with several hotels, including the Inter-Ocean Hotels in Denver and Cheyenne. He co-founded a school for African Americans. The Fords moved to Breckenridge in 1882, building their home on a city block he owned. That home now houses the Barney Ford Museum.

Ford is honored by a stained-glass window in the State Capitol, and a Denver elementary school is named for him. A hill in Breckenridge where Ford staked a mining claim, only to be cheated out of it, had long been called Nigger Hill. In 1964, it was renamed Barney Ford Hill.

The Fords returned to Denver in 1890 where he passed away in December 1902. He is buried at Riverside Cemetery.