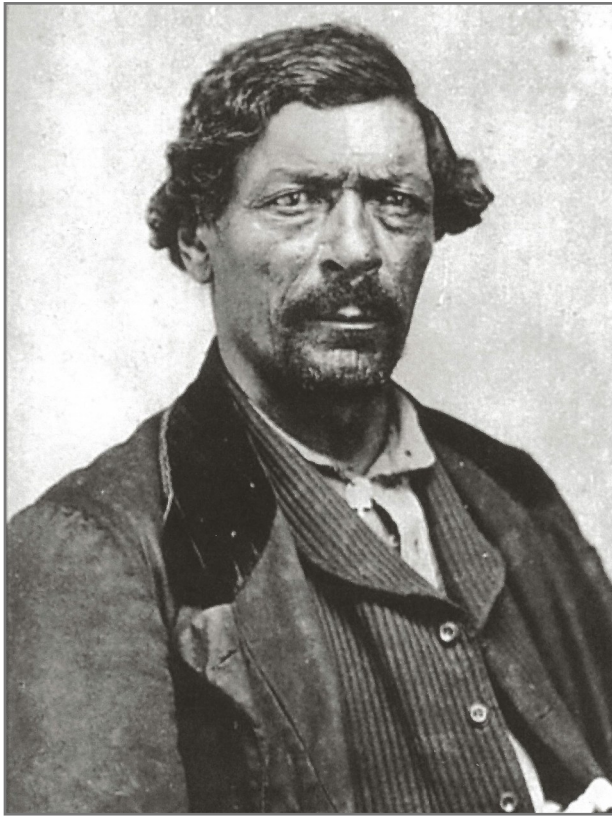


EMIGRANT TRAILS HALL OF FAME

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION



James Pierson Beckwourth

James Beckwith was born into slavery, the mixed-race son of a White plantation overseer and Black mother. His family relocated to Missouri when he was a child, and he apprenticed to a blacksmith for five years. He found other employ as a hunter and in nearby lead mines. In 1824 he joined William Ashley's fur company and headed west. There he remained, with few exceptions, for the rest of his life.

Soon a seasoned trapper, he epitomized the life of a mountain man in the Far West. In 1828 he was welcomed by and settled with the Crow Indians. Over the years he participated in war parties and was a trader for the American Fur Company.

During the early '40s he traded on the front range of the Rocky Mountains, helped found Fort Pueblo, returned to California where he became embroiled in the political turmoil of 1845. The next few years were spent in Santa Fe during the Mexican War.

Hearing of the discovery of gold, Beckwourth returned to California. While exploring the mountain country north and east of the diggings he discovered Beckwourth Pass in the Sierra Nevada, and in 1851 opened the Beckwourth Trail, one of the significant crossings of the Sierra used heavily from 1851-1855. It was the lowest elevation crossing of the Sierras, a much-needed alternative to the difficult Carson and Truckee Trail routes. It departed from the Truckee Trail in today's Sparks, Nevada, and headed west for approximately 200 miles to Bidwell's Bar, near present day Oroville, California. Beckwourth established a ranch and trading post west of the pass where he resided off and on during the trail's heyday.

After a brief residence in St. Louis, he returned to Denver, often guiding military parties, including Colonel John Chivington to Sand Creek (1864). A witness to the massacre, he later condemned the actions of the troops in testimony to a military commission. Now in his late 60s, he returned to and settled again with the Crows where he died in 1866.

Biography

- Born: 1798, Frederick County, Virginia
- Died: 1866, Crow territory
- Trapper, trader, pioneer, explorer, guide, cross-cultural ambassador

Achievements

- Trader for William Ashley's fur company
- Participated in the Seminole War in Florida
- Helped found Fort Pueblo
- Discovered Beckwourth Pass in the Sierra Nevada, and opened the Beckwourth Trail
- Served as guide for military parties

Photo: Wikimedia Commons