

Minneapolis African American Historic and Cultural Context Study



Employment and Professional Growth: *Building wealth and legacies*



*Photos (clockwise from top left):
John Cheatham, courtesy of Hennepin History
Museum; Lena Olive Smith at her hair salon,
courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society; Nellie
Stone Johnston, courtesy of Hennepin County
Library; A.B. Cassius, courtesy of Hennepin
County Library and the children of John Glanton*

The City of Minneapolis has been working since 2019 to document the history of African Americans in Minneapolis. We have published a report about this work. It's called the Minneapolis African American Historic and Cultural Context Study. One section focuses on jobs over time. This is a summary of that content.

People of African descent have lived and worked in the area for over 200 years. Decades before Minneapolis became a city, there were Black fur traders. Others were enslaved and brought to Fort Snelling by officers and military families. Some people came here to seek freedom. Some even fought for Minnesota in the Civil War.

Jobs for Black Minneapolitans were often limited. Due to racist practices, they could often only find work as laborers or in the service industry. A few people arrived with previous training as doctors, teachers, or lawyers. They were able to provide these services to the community. Representation mattered, especially when some white professionals wouldn't serve Black people. Individuals had to advocate for themselves and their community. They fought for better wages and greater opportunity. A.B Cassius, Nellie Stone Johnson, and Albert L. Allen led several key labor actions.

Black people nurtured an entrepreneurial spirit and opened their own businesses. This led to Black commercial districts in various parts of the city. On the Southside, the center was 38th Street East and 4th Avenue South. On the Northside, it was 6th and Lyndale Avenues North. Another district formed at Seven Corners. As family income grew, their children could pursue higher education. They broke barriers in different fields and workplaces. Today, African Americans work in fields across all aspects of life.

Examples of jobs in different time periods:

Early 1800s

- Fur traders
- Enslaved laborers at Fort Snelling
- Language interpreters
- Cooks
- Barbers
- Military



George Bonga, a fur trader, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society

1860-1910

- Cooks
- Waiters
- Hotel staff
- Janitors
- Meat packing plants
- Railroads
- Domestic work
- Law
- Medicine
- Publishing
- Politics
- Firefighters

1910-1960

- Business owners
- Postal workers
- Labor activists
- Expansion into other professional fields

1960-present

- Wide range of roles and industries



**Scan to learn more in the
Minneapolis African American
Historic and Cultural Context Study**

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