

New book tells story of forgotten black Mormons

by [Peggy Fletcher Stack](#)

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) Green Flake was in the vanguard company of Mormon pioneers in 1847, driving a wagon into the Salt Lake Valley with LDS prophet Brigham Young, who famously declared Utah to be the right place to build Zion.

But you won't likely see a figure of Flake atop any floats in the Days of '47 Parade down the streets of Utah's capital this Thursday (July 24).

That could be because Flake's story is unfamiliar to the vast majority of Mormons. Or because the South Carolina-born convert's narrative is, well, a tad more difficult than the typical pioneer tale: He was black and a slave, who was once donated to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as "tithing" after his owner couldn't find a buyer.

Mention of these black members brings up a painful part of the Mormon past—for more than a century blacks were barred from ordination to the faith's all-male priesthood, and black women were denied access to temple rituals as well. That didn't end until 1978.

Omitting Flake and more than 50 other black pioneers from the heroic recounting of the massive LDS trek across the Plains is not just an oversight, say Mormon historians and members, it is a travesty.

"If we don't celebrate our full history, we are actually celebrating a lie," said Tamu Smith, co-author with Zandra Vranes of *Diary of Two Mad Black Mormons*. "We know that we were there, so when people leave us out on purpose, they are not celebrating their own history."

Accounts of black pioneers, argued Smith and Vranes, should be as well-known inside the 15 million-member LDS church as yarns of Young, Mary Fielding Smith (a

widow who reportedly healed her dying oxen), and the Willie and Martin handcart companies (many members of which lost their lives along the way).

“Our stories need to be told over and over and over just like the other ones,” Vranes said. “When we tell people that Green Flake was right there when Brigham Young said, ‘This is the place,’ they don’t believe us.”

Vranes and Smith hope a new book by Mormon scholar Russell Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830-2013*, scheduled to be released by Kofford Books in the fall, will spread awareness of black pioneers more widely and provide historical support for what they’ve been saying for years.

Stevenson, who will begin a doctoral program at Michigan State University this fall, offers new details about the lives of black Mormons, some known, others new.

“I hope my book can prompt all of us—but especially white Latter-day Saints,” Stevenson said, “to ask hard questions about our racial assumptions.”

Black Mormon pioneers were “doubly Mormon—if 19th-century Mormon identity was defined in large measure through persecution,” explained Max Mueller, who, using the LDS Church as a case study, just finished a dissertation at Harvard on the relationship between race and religion in that time period.

“Black Mormons were persecuted along with white saints,” Mueller wrote in an email from Boston, “but their fellow brethren also excluded them from full participation in the religious culture to which intrepid pioneers like Elijah Abel and Jane Manning James dedicated their lives.”

Thus, accounts of the earliest black Mormons are among the most wrenching.

Flake, for example, joined the faith in 1844 along with his white owners, James and Agnes Flake (to whom he had been given as a wedding present), Stevenson said.

James Flake died in a farming accident in 1850, leaving Agnes a widow, he notes. “According to Agnes’ son, she left behind Flake as an offering to the church and moved to California but only after a futile effort to sell him to other Mormons in the territory.”

In 1854, Young gave Flake his freedom. Flake remained a devout Mormon for the rest of his life. He is listed as a “servant” on the monument at This Is the Place Heritage Park in Salt Lake City’s eastern foothills.

“Green Flake found himself compelled to live out the paradox that was the black Mormon experience,” Stevenson said.

He is glad that Latter-day Saints are now recovering Flake’s story, but he finds it “as tragic as it is hopeful.”