



City Council

Special Recognition - Proclamation Recognizing Charles Mitchell Day

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Title

Special Recognition - Proclamation Recognizing Charles Mitchell Day

Recommended Action

Committee Recommendation:

Not referred to a committee.

City Manager Recommendation:

Proclaim September 24, 2019 Charles Mitchell Day in the City of Olympia.

Report

Issue:

Whether to Proclaim September 24, 2019 Charles Mitchell Day in the City of Olympia.

Staff Contact:

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Presenter(s):

Judy Bentley, Retired teacher, Historian and Co-Author of *Free Boy*, the story of Charles Mitchell, co-authored with public historian Lorraine McConaghy

Background and Analysis:

The story of Charles Mitchel was recently discovered and researched by historians Lorraine McConaghy and Judith Bentley. It was first presented at the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle, within an exhibit on Civil War history in the Northwest, and it is the subject of a Young Adult Literature book titled *Free Boy*, published in 2013. However, this illuminating piece of local history has yet to be fully embraced and broadly shared here in Olympia.

Charles Mitchell was born into a slave family on a plantation in Maryland in 1847. At age five, Charles became a wedding gift. He was given to James Tilton, a veteran and war hero, a surveyor, and in 1853, a political appointee to Washington Territory. He was selected by the newly-elected democratic president Franklin Pierce to serve as Washington's Surveyor General.

Tilton and his family moved to Olympia in 1855, bringing Charles with them. They lived in a home on

Columbia Street between 9th and 10th Avenues (just uphill from Swing Wine Bar), and Charles was a familiar presence in Olympia. He frequently ran household errands, was training to become a steward and cook, and served at dinners and parties in the Tilton home, which was a social and political center in town. He attended school and church locally.

When he was about 12 years old, Charles was approached by African American men from Victoria, B.C., one of whom had briefly lived in Olympia. Slavery was illegal in Canada, and Victoria had a thriving Black community. These men encouraged Charles to escape to freedom with their help.

In September 1860 Charles took them up on their offer, stowing away on a steamship headed north to Victoria. He was discovered on board before arriving in Victoria, and nearly returned to slavery in Olympia. His plight became an international incident that was reported in newspapers all down the West Coast, and Tilton's protests went as far as the US Secretary of State. Legal maneuverings by a supportive community in Victoria secured Charles' freedom and welcomed him in.

Charles Mitchell's legacy includes being the first and only fugitive slave to travel from Washington Territory to the Crown Colony of Victoria on the Puget Sound Underground Railway. His story offers us a precious window into our shared past and the complicated political and social dynamics that shaped the life of this one brave boy, this community of Olympia, and this nation.

Financial Impact:

N/A

Attachments:

Proclamation