

# Augustus "Gus" Waterford

Portland's First African American Firefighter

Born March 12, 1860 - Died March 26, 1909

Employed by Portland Fire from 1890 to 1895

Adam Augustus "Gus" Waterford was born in British Columbia in 1860, the son of Alexander Waterford, a self-freed slave from Tennessee, and Martha Griffin Waterford, a Kentucky woman.

In 1865 the family moved to Portland, where Gus grew up with several brothers and sisters. Alexander Waterford found work as a laborer and participated actively in Republican Party politics. Records have not come to light to substantiate the rumor that Alexander Waterford worked as a Deputy for the Multnomah County Sheriff or served as a Justice of the Peace in East Portland in the 1870s. He did some kind of work for the city of Portland in 1874, for which he was paid \$26. He was a founding member of the Hayes and Wheeler Republican Club in 1876, along with Joseph Simon, W. Lair Hill and Henry Corbett, becoming one of the first black Republican Party activists and paving the way for his son's career in Joseph Simon's political machine.

Gus Waterford was not a large man, but he and his brothers stood up for each other. When Gus was assaulted by Sam Glover in 1886, his brother William came to his defense. Glover and William Waterford were each fined \$5 for the fight in front of the Snowflake Saloon. This June 6, 1866 *Oregonian* article documents the event.

**GETTING EVEN.**  
A couple of days ago Sam Glover had a misunderstanding with Gus Waterford, a negro, and struck him. Gus had Glover arrested and fined \$5. Yesterday William Waterford, Gus's brother, met Glover in front of the Snowflake saloon and to get even, hit him with his fist on the jaw. Glover got even by having William Waterford arrested, and he likewise was fined \$5. The fight is probably over by this time.

By this time, Joseph Simon was establishing a firm hold on politics everywhere in the state, including Portland. Like big city bosses all over the country, Simon made alliances with influential men in various ethnic communities in order to bring out the vote. In Portland, African American orators, such as Julius Caesar, stumped for Republican candidates and brought out the Black vote. Gus Waterford, with the help of his father who was by then a Grand Old Man of the Party, found a place for himself in Simon's machine. Young Waterford may have been a little too outspoken for his own good though. Where the *Oregonian* spoke admiringly of men like Caesar, who cooperated in spreading racial stereotypes, they never spoke respectfully of Gus Waterford and they failed to report on his career achievements.

In 1896 the *Oregonian* referred to Gus Waterford as "the well-known politician, ward heeler, and wire puller" (wire puller may have referred to employment in the Fire Alarm Telegraph arm of Portland Fire).

Fire Department records have not yet been unearthed to confirm the date of Waterford's hire, but he is acknowledged as the first African American employee of the Fire Department. It is most likely that he was hired in the 1890s, because political warfare between two factions of the Republican Party led Joe Simon to put pressure on the city of Portland to hire African Americans. In 1892 Moody Scott became the first black employee of the City and George Hardin became a Portland policeman in 1894. At

some point during this time Waterford became Portland's first black firefighter. Like Hardin, who was laid off from the Police force in 1895, Waterford didn't last long in the Fire Department, but he was a strong enough ally of now U.S. Senator Joseph Simon that he became the first African American employee of the Portland Post Office, where he worked as a Porter and Supply Clerk.

Waterford was fired by Postmaster John Minto in 1908 in a scandalous case that was either an attempt to blackmail Minto or a graft operation in which Minto skimmed money from Waterford's wages. The truth of the matter depends on what you believe, but few powerful Portlanders at that time were willing to take the word of a black man against a white man. Waterford was probably in declining health when he left the Post Office, because he died of stomach cancer in less than a year. His obituary is shown here from a March 27, 1909 Oregonian listing.

**WELL-KNOWN COLORED MAN DEAD.—** Augustus Waterford, supply clerk in the Portland Postoffice for the last 14 years, died at St. Vincent's Hospital, at 19 o'clock yesterday morning, after an unsuccessful operation for cancer of the stomach. The operation was performed last Tuesday. Waterford was born in Dresden, Canada, in 1860. He came to Oregon with his parents in 1855. He is the only colored man who ever held a position in the Portland Fire Department. He was appointed Deputy Sheriff under Penumbra Kelly. The funeral will be held at Zion Church, Sunday at 2 P. M. Interment will be in Lone Fir Cemetery, where his relatives are buried.

Gus Waterford is buried now in a family plot in Lone Fir Cemetery, but there was no marker over his grave. His brother William lived another thirty years, dying in 1938 of atherosclerosis. William, who suffered from dementia, was hospitalized in the Oregon State Hospital at the time of his death. His cremated remains are among the thousands of unclaimed urns collected in the Oregon State Hospital awaiting a family member to claim them.

Gus' grave site would take a turn over 100 years after his death.

Madison High School students in Jason Miller's "Portland History" class chose "*Hidden History of Portland*" as the class textbook. "It focuses on the minority story and the women's story, not just the Mr. Pettygrove and Mr. Hawthorne," class teacher Jason Miller said. The kids loved it. They learned about Gus Waterford and Beatrice Morrow Cannady, a founding member of Portland's NAACP.

Miller asked the book's author, local historian JD Chandler, if he'd be willing to visit the class. When Chandler spoke to the students at Madison High one April day, he told the kids he's most known as a crime writer. "I know where all the bodies are buried," he went on to say. One student joked that Chandler should take them on a fieldtrip to a graveyard. And thus they found themselves at Lone Fir Cemetery, Portland's oldest continually used cemetery. Twenty-five thousand people have been buried at Lone Fir since 1850.

Chandler showed them the space in Block 26 where Waterford was buried beside his mother, Martha Waterford. Martha Waterford has a headstone, a tall pillar that promises she is "gone but not forgotten." Another Waterford is interred beside her, the 1867 death documented by a cracked and fading stone. But Gus Waterford's plot, which is noted in Lone Fir's burial records, has no marker. "It was unfair," said Royce Hayson, a Madison senior. "He's not respected the way he should be."

They read more on Waterford and learned he had created political clubs and a newspaper for African Americans. Little information existed about Waterford's time with Portland Fire, but the students didn't need a newspaper clipping to tell them being the first African American working in a city bureau wouldn't have been easy.

At this point, the students decided action was necessary. All agreed they wanted to buy him a memorial, a gravemarker. "But you can't just go around putting tombstones on people's graves," Miller remarked. Hayson called Metro, the regional government agency with responsibility for the cemetery. He posed the question and learned they would need permission from one of Waterford's relatives.

So the students started digging. Lilian Barchers, a senior, enrolled in a 14-day free trial for Ancestry.com. She spent hours combing through family trees, obituaries and U.S. Census data. She found a few distant cousins and contacted them.

While they waited for the OK, Hayson researched prices. The cheapest memorials cost \$460, but they wanted to buy something nice to honor Waterford. They needed donations to do so. Hayson and the others began talking to community members.

Another student, Caroline Price, started talking to firefighters. She was a member of Portland Fire & Rescue's Explorer program. If the students were to launch a fundraising campaign, they wanted the Fire Bureau's support.

"Our history must not be complete unless every great man and woman gets their biography recorded," Barchers said. "Men like Augustus Waterford ... should, at the very least, have their names recorded on their final resting place."

Today, Gus Waterford's grave is graced with the marker shown here. He is buried in Block 16, Lot 48, Grave 2N.

Thanks to Sherylita Maison Cruise of the Friends of the Golden West Hotel for the original research that went into this article.

Thanks also to the Oregon Black Pioneers for helping to preserve Oregon's black history.

The Portland Firefighter's Association has promoted the "Gus Waterford Memorial Scholarship" to provide funds for those aspiring to enter professions in public safety. Click [HERE](#) to go to the PFFA web site and find information on how to apply or support the [Gus Waterford Memorial Scholarship](#).

