Rebecca Howard: A Determined 19th Century Businesswoman

By Jennifer Crooks

Rebecca Howard is one of the most famous women in Olympia's history. Although information on her is limited, it is clear that she lived an important and interesting life. She was a businesswoman, wife, and mother with a determined character. As an African American woman in the late nineteenth century, Rebecca faced great prejudice and racism. But she was able to overcome this and become a prominent and well-loved citizen in the eyes of many Olympians.

Rebecca H. Groundage was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1827. Alexander Howard, who would later become her husband, was born seven years earlier on the 25th of June, possibly in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Both of them were born into free African American families. On November 2, 1843, Alexander Howard married Rebecca Groundage in New Bedford. The couple would be married for thirty-eight years, until Rebecca's death. Alexander was a cooper, a maker of barrels. The couple remained in New Bedford for a few years.

By 1859, the Howards had moved to Olympia. Few African Americans lived in Washington Territory at the time. On September 9th, the *Pioneer and Democrat* newspaper published an advertisement for the Pacific Restaurant (formerly called the Pacific House), the first record of the Howards in Olympia. Their establishment was advertised under Alexander's name: "The proprietor will endeavor to maintain the reputation this establishment has ever sustained since its opening as the BEST HOUSE in town. No effort will be spared to make the stay of parties seeking pleasure here as ably as possible." The Howards also promised "meals at every hour of day or night." Later advertisements were in Rebecca's name.

Located on Third and Main Streets (now State Avenue and Capitol Way), the Pacific House/Restaurant under the management of Rebecca Howard became known as the best place to eat in Olympia. *Courtesy Roger Easton.*

Col. William Cock originally built the Pacific House in 1854 and added an annex of twenty feet a few years later. Apparently, Mr. and Mrs. Howard leased the House for a while (renaming it the Pacific Restaurant though it was still commonly known as the Pacific House), but owned it by a later date. The building was renovated by 1860. According to the May 16, 1860 issue of the *Pioneer and Democrat*, the hotel promised "good clean beds and well-ventilated rooms." In time, Rebecca's establishment became known as the best place to eat in town. What was served there would be interesting to know.

The Pacific House /Restaurant was located

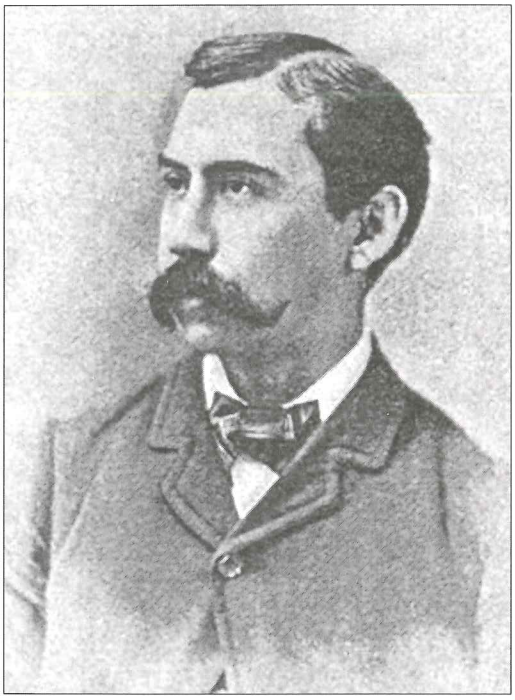
on Third and Main Streets (State Avenue and Capitol Way today). During Rebecca Howard's time at the Pacific House, her establishment was visited by a number of famous people, including General William Tecumseh Sherman, President Rutherford B. Hayes, General Irvin McDowell, and General Winfield Scott.

Although the Howards had no children of their own, they took in the son of Thomas W. Glasgow, a child named Isaac Ingalls Stevens Glasgow after the first Washington Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens. Thomas Glasgow, a Pennsylvania farmer with a bad criminal record, was believed to be abusing his part Native American son who was born on June 25, 1857, in Olympia. When Isaac was almost five years old, Rebecca Howard signed an indenture with his father, taking the son as her ward on these conditions—1. Raise him for sixteen years or until Isaac turned twenty-one, 2. Provide food and clothing, 3. Give him "equal opportunity."

The Howards did all this, and by 1877 they had adopted the boy and renamed him Frank Alexander Howard.

According to the May 1891 *Olympia Tribune Souvenir*, Frank Howard was educated in public schools and in later life "traveled over the United States several times, meeting with many interesting adventures." He married Lillie (Lydia according to the 1890 census) Howard (no relation). The same article noted that Frank was a well respected prominent citizen, owned much property and was a broker at a business on 303 Fourth Street. It concluded that "For the welfare of Olympia, his native place, he is ever ready to lend a helping hand." He later owned the Pacific House. The September 2, 1881 *Puget Sound Weekly Courier* recorded him leasing the building to a "Mr. Willa". Frank eventually sold it to Capt. Hambright as a saloon before it was torn down.

Rebecca Howard died on Sunday, July 10, 1881 of a stroke according to the *Washington Standard* newspaper, which recorded her having suffered paralysis and unconsciousness before her death. On the following Tuesday afternoon her funeral was held at St. John's Episcopal Church of which she was a member. Even John Miller Murphy, noted for his racism, had only kind things



Frank Howard, the adopted son of Rebecca and Alexander Howard, 1891. *Courtesy Roger Easton.*

to say when she died. He wrote that "she was one of our oldest residents, and had many warm friends." Rebecca was only fifty-four years old when she passed away. Her husband died nine years later. Both Rebecca and Alexander were buried in Tumwater's Masonic Cemetery.

In her will, Rebecca divided her property evenly between her son and husband. The inventory of real and personal property done on the 9th and 10th of January 1882 (which can be found in her probate files at Washington State Archives), took twenty-six pages to list everything in every hotel room—for a total worth of $6, 212.50—quite a large sum for a working woman in those days. Alexander later became a gardener according to an 1888 directory.

Various stories have been told about Rebecca Howard. Some stories related how she was addressed by others. Many people tried to call her "Aunt Becky" which was racially condescending. Rebecca allowed only her close friends to call her that, firmly asserting she was to be addressed as "Mrs. Howard," a title of respect she deserved. The most famous tale about her is when the newly installed Governor Pickering called her "Aunt Becky" she responded that she

was neither the sister of his mother or father.

In December 1862, restaurant patrons J.D. Bagley and M.S. Griswold started a fight regarding the murder of Horace Howe by Benjamin Kendell. Rebecca stopped the fight by grabbing Griswold, lifting him two feet in the air until he lost his fighting urge. "Becky's grip reminded me of an old fashioned locksmith's vise" Griswold later told the *Pacific Herald* newspaper.

The Pacific House was demolished in 1902, considered to be an "eyesore." The *Washington Standard* on September 5th commented that the building "with its low ceilings and primitive construction had to pass to the rear under the march of improvement and creation of more modern buildings." This was a great loss to Olympia's heritage. The site of the building is now a parking lot.

Little has been written about Rebecca Howard. Indeed, she is a woman of some mystery. With further research, more information will be discovered about her life. In the 19th century era of racism and sexism, Rebecca Howard was able to create a prosperous business and achieve considerable popularity. These accomplishments, observed the *Washington Standard* article of September 5, 1902, revealed a strong character whose "wit and humor as well as other adaptations for the position of hostess made the Pacific [House] an oasis in the then desert of travel."

Jennifer Crooks is a senior at Olympia High School. Although she mostly writes science-fiction stories, she maintains a strong interest in history and foreign cultures/languages. She hopes to become either a historian or writer in the future.

Detail from Eli Sheldon Glover's "Bird's Eye View of the City of Olympia, East Olympia and Tumwater, Puget Sound, Washington Territory," 1879. *Courtesy City of Olympia.*