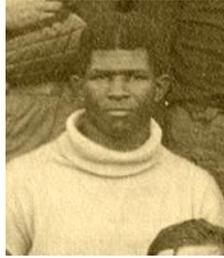


Abner Leonard Howell: Honorary High Priest

By Margaret Blair Young



Abner Leonard Howell's life in Utah, first as a non-Mormon and later as a Mormon, give compelling insights into African American life among the Saints. Because we have not only Abner's recorded life story but his non-LDS sister's manuscript version of the Howell family saga, we see intriguing contrasts between what each includes or omits, and the word choice each uses.

Byrdie Howell Langdon, in her typewritten, fifty-page manuscript, describes her parents, Paul and Mary, in relation to the slavery around them, and portrays her grandparents' courtship thus:

During slavery time in Mansfield, Louisiana, a Mr. McClelland had a plantation. He was the father of two daughters and one son by his slave maid. [When they went to Scotland] she had a son by him, which was common during slavery and they named him Jack. [McClelland] told the boy that when he reached age 21, he was going to give him his freedom papers, but Jack had a mind of his own and by having some education knew that slavery was wrong as many white people knew. . . .

Living next to the McClelland's was a family by the name of Howell, who was also fond of Jack. He and Mr. Howell had many talks about slavery. . . . There was one girl named Mary Eliza who Jack was

very fond of and so Jack married her, but he was so angry with his own father for still selling slaves that when he married Mary Liza he took her name of Howell. She was a very pretty Madagascar girl. They had seven or eight boys, [including] Paul Cephas Howell [Abner and Byrdie's father].¹

Abner Howell is straightforward about his parents' past slavery, and says in his tape-recorded life story: "My mother and father were both slaves and didn't have the opportunity of education, so in my house there were no books because neither could read."²

Though Abner's birth date is listed as August 9, 1877 on his gravestone, Byrdie Langon lists it as August 9, 1878. Perhaps this is a mere slip of memory, but it does completely establish Abner's legitimacy. Paul and Mary Ann Howell (the parents) were married on November 1, 1877.

Langdon says that her father "taught school, cut timber, and did any job he could" in Louisiana,³ but Abner's version indicates that because of slavery, his parents "didn't have the opportunity of education, so in my house there were no books because neither could read."⁴ One wonders what Paul Howell taught in Louisiana if he was illiterate. What's clear is his determination to find good work. Also clear is Abner Howell's intention to honor his parents' rise in situation and to escape the kind of poverty he knew

¹ Byrdie Howell Langon, "Utah and the Early Black Settlers," 1969, typescript, 1-2, copy in my possession.

² Abner Howell, undated tape recording of a speech to LDS "sisters," provided to Margaret Blair Young and Darius Aidan Gray by Boyd Burbridge.

³ Langon, "Utah and the Early Black Settlers," 3.

⁴ Howell, tape recording.

as a child, which becomes significant when compared with the opportunities he found as an adult. The fact that Paul Howell began life as a slave and ended as not only a skilled brick layer but the first black detective in the nation suggests an unusual work ethic and bold ambition.

With lofty goals, Paul Cephas Howell and his brother, Levi, arrived in Salt Lake City in 1889, seeking a stable place for their families and fair employment. In Abner's talk to a Mormon gathering, he claims that his father, while still a slave, was told by Wilford Woodruff that he'd go to Salt Lake and do a great work.⁵ We have no other corroboration for that verbal claim, but it illustrates with Abner's way of weaving his own story into the larger Mormon narrative, especially through mentioning church authorities. As for life in Salt Lake City (the rest of the Howell family arrived in 1890), Langon claims it was better for blacks than in most places: "There were many Negroes who moved into Salt Lake after the nineties who were not of the Mormon religion. . . . After so many white southerners moved into Salt Lake . . . that is when Salt Lake really became prejudiced."⁶

Abner, speaking to an LDS group in the recording, shrewdly identifies prejudice with only non-Mormons, or "gentiles," as follows:

I lived in Salt Lake for 70 years and grew up as a little boy. I come here where I was a little fellow, nine years old. I had a hard time coming up, because when I was a boy, there were no black boys but myself. I had five sisters, but I was the only boy. I had a hard time. At that time, boys

⁵ Howell, tape recording.

⁶ Langon, "Utah and the Early Black Settlers," 23.

whose parents didn't belong to the Church were called gentiles. . . . One time one of the gentile boys said to me, "Don't you know that black boys don't go to Heaven?" At that time, I was selling newspapers. . . . I thought that over. He said, "All black people go to Hell." That hurt me. And John Henry Smith, father of George Albert Smith, came along. He said, "What's the matter, Ab?" I told him. He says, "Don't believe that. You come over the house with me." He got the Book of Mormon. He opened the Book of Mormon to the second chapter of Nephi, the 26th chapter, the very last verse, and he read that to me, and that helped me.⁷

In fact, the priesthood restriction was in place, but not codified, by the time the Howell family arrived—and racism was endemic in Utah culture just as it was throughout America. The family initially lived on 300 South in Salt Lake City. Circumstance determined location, and eventually blacks in Salt Lake resided almost exclusively in the Mill Creek area (3300 South), with de-facto segregation actively maintained. Nonetheless, for blacks from the South, the passive racism was surely an improvement over what they had left.

Indeed, Abner Howell became a local celebrity due to his football skills. Langon claims that her brother "was as famous in those days as Willie Mays is today,"⁸ and a local newspaper reported that "Abe [sic] Howell," "a colored fullback," was "everything from the bandwagon to the steam calliope."⁹ This description was of that game between

⁷ Howell, tape recording.

⁸ Langon, "Utah and the Early Black Settler," 26.

⁹ Wendell J. Ashton, *Voice in the West: Biography of a Pioneer Newspaper* (New York: Duel, Sloan and Pearce, 1950), 235.

Salt Lake High and East Denver High, a game which clearly embedded itself in Abner's memory.

Abner's own description (from his audio recording) follows:

In my high school days, I played football. In those days, football was quite rough. There were no rules. . . . In November of the 1900s, we played Denver. Before that game came up, my good friend, Nicholas Smith said, "Kneel down, kneel down." I didn't pray then so good as I do now. I didn't talk so good then as I do now. And he offered up a wonderful prayer. Nick was a guard, and every time I had a ball and he made a gain, I'd look up and there would be Nick, every time.¹⁰

Nicholas Groesbeck Smith, son of Mormon apostle and patriarch John Henry Smith, would even stand up to the segregation in Utah restaurants. When an Ogden restaurant refused to let Howell eat with the rest of the team in the dining room, Nick said, "Then we'll all eat in the kitchen with him."¹¹ The restaurant relented.¹²

Just after the turn of the century, Nick Smith and Abner Howell parted ways—Abner graduating from Salt Lake High School as the first black to do so. Nicholas began missionary service in the Netherlands. Meanwhile, Abner was invited by church apostle Heber Grant to serve as a Pullman porter for him and fifty missionaries headed to the ocean in Oregon, where they would sail to Japan. Abner's response (as recorded) was, "Sure. I've never been north of Ogden yet, so that'll be fine with me." He reported that

¹⁰ Howell, tape recording.

¹¹ Lavina F. Anderson, "A Ministry of Blessing: Nicholas Groesbeck Smith," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 31 (Fall 1998), 61 note 3.

¹² Nicholas G. Smith II (son of Nicholas Groesbeck Smith), interviewed by Margaret Blair Young, June 20, 2013.

“the missionaries wanted to take me with them, but President Grant told them that was impossible because I had to go back with that Pullman Car to Salt Lake. President Grant also told me: ‘As long as you stay faithful to your church and endure to the end, you will always have good luck. Fortune will always smile upon you, mentally, physically, and spiritually.’”¹³

The church Grant was referring was not LDS one, but likely the all-Black A.M.E. in Salt Lake City, though Howell chose not to distinguish which church was being referenced as he reported the incident to his Mormon audience.

Ironically, the tract Heber Grant and the missionaries carried with them referred to ideals that did not apply fully to those of African lineage during that time. It read:

As an Apostle and a Minister of the Most High God, I salute you. We bring to you greater light, more truth, and an advanced knowledge, which we offer you freely. We recognize you as the children of our common Father, the Creator of the universe. The spirits of all men are the offspring of God. Therefore, men and women of all races and kindreds and tribes and tongues upon the face of the earth are brothers and sisters.¹⁴

Abner, from all appearances, seemed oblivious to his exclusion or its implications. After his return to Utah, full of hope and ambition, he enrolled in “law studies” at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Langdon describes her brother’s plans circumspectly: “His ambition was to become an attorney. . . . [S]ome of his classmates were going to Ann Arbor, MI, but their

¹³ Howell, tape recording.

¹⁴ Bryant S. Hinckley, *Heber J. Grant: Highlights in the Life of a Great Leader* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 103.

parents had money but Abner had to earn his money and work his way through school. . . . He took on a few more jobs and in two years he had saved enough money to enter Ann Arbor Law school.”¹⁵

Abner’s matriculation into Law Studies at the University of Michigan was quite an accomplishment for a black man during this time. Given that other blacks admitted into law schools were mistreated or possibly murdered (Lloyd Gains disappeared shortly after his Supreme Court-mandated acceptance to a Missouri law school in 1938¹⁶), Langon’s casual mention of Howell’s ambitions is notable.

Howell did make a valiant attempt to study law, and is listed as a second-year student in the “Department of Law” at Ann Arbor from 1903-1904.¹⁷

Clearly, Howell planned on sustaining the kind of celebrity he had enjoyed in Salt Lake City as a football player and was on the famous University of Michigan team under Coach Fielding Yost. It was a superb team. From 1901 to 1904, Michigan won all of its games, and was tied only once. Yost had a famous mantra of “a point a minute,” and Howell was part of the team’s success from 1902-1904.¹⁸ Though Yost was a notorious racist during his early years of coaching, and though at least one biography has claimed

¹⁵ Langon, “Utah and the Early Black Settlers,” 26.

¹⁶ Chad Garrison, “The Mystery of Lloyd Gaines,” *Riverfront Times*, April 4, 2007, <http://www.riverfronttimes.com/2007-04-04/news/the-mystery-of-lloyd-gaines/> (accessed January 6, 2014).

¹⁷ *Calendar of the University of Michigan* (Ann Arbor, 1904), 351.

¹⁸ “Fielding H. Yost,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fielding_H._Yost (accessed January 7, 2014); “Abner Howell,” *Oxford African American Studies Center*, <http://www.oxfordaasc.com/article/opr/t0001/e2951> (accessed May 31, 2013).

that Abner Howell was not included in team photos because of Yost's racism, Howell is pictured in at least two photos from 1902.¹⁹

The biography of Howell from the online *Oxford African American Studies Center* claims:

Howell was excluded from official team photographs. His name does not even appear in a 1974 book devoted to the history of black athletes at the university. Coach Yost was known to harbor racist feelings, but he permitted Howell to play because his exceptional athleticism made the Michigan team virtually unbeatable. Yost remained as football coach at Michigan until 1926 and then served as Michigan's athletic director until 1941. With the sole exception of Howell, Yost reportedly excluded all other black student-athletes from playing football for the university until 1932.²⁰

Though the article is wrong about the photograph, it is correct about Howell's exclusion from the 1974 history of black athletes.

Whatever fame Howell attained as a Michigan Wolverine, his athletics could not sustain a family. Money was scarce, especially after Howell married Nina Stevenson on August 30, 1904²¹ and his father died. There is, of course, no documentation of the pain

¹⁹ See "University of Michigan Football Team, 1902; BL006457," *Bentley Image Bank*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhl/x-bl006457/BL006457>; and "1902 U-M Freshman Football Team; BL009531," *Bentley Image Bank*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhl/x-bl009531/BL009531> (both accessed January 7, 2014). The second photo also appears in *The 1903 Michiganensian* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1903), 194, accessible online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/AAG4364.1903.001/198> (accessed January 7, 2014).

²⁰ "Abner Howell," *Oxford African American Studies Center*.

²¹ Howell's own account—in Kate B. Carter, *Negro Pioneer* (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers), 58—says the marriage took place in 1903, but the official record says it was August 30, 1904.

Howell must have felt as he packed up his possessions and his pregnant wife, and abandoned his dreams of becoming a lawyer. He returned with Nina to Utah, where he adopted his father's former profession—that of a bricklayer.

In 1908, major decisions were made in the LDS Church under President Joseph F. Smith's direction, especially in regards to people of color.

When church president John Taylor had asked in 1879 if founder Joseph Smith, Jr. had ever said that blacks should not be ordained to the priesthood, Zebedee Coltrin claimed that he had personally heard Smith agree with him that “the Negro hath no right to the priesthood.” According to Coltrin's memory (of an event which had occurred in 1836), Elijah Abel, whom Joseph himself had ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood, was “dropped from the quorum once his race was discovered.” Joseph F. Smith quickly produced two re-certifications of Abel's priesthood, proving that Coltrin was wrong. In August 1908, however, with Jane Manning James having died on April 22, Joseph F. Smith reversed his own words and agreed with Coltrin. Smith's decision to reverse himself likely set the priesthood restriction in the Mormon institutional memory.²²

See "Michigan, Marriages, 1868-1925," index and images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/N3F5-QWH> : accessed 6 Jan 2014), Abner Howell and Nina Stevenson, 30 Aug 1904. The Howells' first child, according to Abner's account in Carter's book and to birth records, was born in November 1904, meaning that Nina was five or six months pregnant when they wed, thus increasing the pressure for Abner to drop out of school and make a living that could sustain his family.

²² The minutes of the meeting in which the decision was made read as follows: “In this connection President Smith referred to Elijah Abel, who was ordained a Seventy by Joseph Young, in the days of the Prophet Joseph, to whom Brother Young issued a Seventies certificate; but this ordination was declared null and void by the Prophet himself. Later Brother Abel appealed to President Young for the privilege of receiving his endowments and to have his wife and children sealed to him, a privilege President Young could not grant. Brother Abel renewed his application to President Taylor with the same result; and still the same appeal was made to President Woodruff afterwards who of course upheld the position taken by Presidents Young and Taylor. . . .” (Council minutes, August 26, 1908, Bennion [or GAS] papers, LDS Church Archives), quoted in Lester Bush, “Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” in *Neither White Nor Black*, edited by Lester Bush and Armand Mauss (Midvale, Utah: Signature Press, 1984), 116 note 133. For a discussion of the reversal of policy, see the entire article: Bush, “Mormonism's Negro Doctrine,” 53-129.

That same month in South Africa, where the church had established a mission, a native convert and a Zulu chief both expressed a desire to preach to their own people. The Quorum responded that there should be no proselytizing among native tribes of Africa. This was contradictory to the idea stated during the Nauvoo years that “we may soon expect to see flocking to this place, people from every land and from every nation, the polished European, the degraded Hottentot, and the shivering Laplander,”²³ but indicated that the restrictive policy had now been set.

Abner’s old friend, Nicholas Smith, became the mission president in South Africa in 1913, and remained until 1921—his call having been lengthened because of the complexities of World War I. Shortly before Smith returned to Utah, Abner Leonard Howell was baptized. His baptism, on February 26, 1921, took place just nine days after the death of his son, Paul.

We have no record of Nina Howell’s baptism, though Howell claims that all of his family converted to Mormonism.²⁴ Nina died in 1945, and Abner soon married Martha Stevenson Perkins, widow of Sylvester Perkins, whose father had been a slave of Mormon pioneer Reuben Perkins. Martha was the granddaughter of the famous vanguard pioneer company’s “colored servant” (one of three), Green Flake. When she had married Sylvester Perkins, she shared her wedding day with Nettie James, granddaughter of the famous Jane Manning James. Nettie had married Louis Leggroan in a double ceremony.

²³ Joseph Smith, et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1951 printing), 4:213.

²⁴ Carter, *Negro Pioneer*, 16.

The significance of Martha's heritage was not lost on Abner, who connected himself with the black Mormon legacy through Martha. "My wife's grandfather was given to Brigham Young as tithing," he told his LDS audience. "Brigham Young took a great liking to Green Flake. That wagon [in which Young rode] was the property of President Woodruff, and Green drove that wagon clear across the plains."

Abner clearly knew the way to a Mormon's heart: prominent associations. In the recording of his fireside presentation or in reporting his life to historian Kate Carter, he mentions each of these white Mormon leaders with whom he had contact:

John Henry Smith

George Albert Smith

Gordon B. Hinckley

Heber J. Grant

David O. McKay

Nicholas G. Smith

Green Flake

Brigham Young

Mark E. Peterson

Spencer W. Kimball

Paul Dunn

Most prominently, he spoke of Heber J. Grant, whom he knew since boyhood, and "always liked . . . because he used to let me in the baseball games when he used to play second base on the team."²⁵ In his tape recording, Howell reports meeting Heber

²⁵ Ibid., 58.

Grant, then president of the church, thirty-four years after attending to him and the Japan-bound missionaries as a porter:

[President Grant] organized the welfare plan, and I went down to build those buildings there at the welfare plan, and President Grant came to set the cornerstone, and I helped set the stone, then after, he took me aside and he said, “I’m so glad to see you. It’s 34 years since I saw you. I’ve kept track of you, and I find you haven’t deviated one bit from your original intention, living the gospel to the fullest extent, and I thank you and I thank Heaven and I thank our God that He smiled upon me this time and allowed me to attain to the age I have—80 years—with physical strength, able to propel myself from place to place and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.”²⁶

Byrdie Langon mentions none of Abner’s LDS Church connections, since she is writing a history of all blacks in Utah, not of Black Mormons. Abner, however, seemed to recognize his unique position as a black Latter-day Saint. He was a rarity, and therefore exotic. He could be the “best black friend” any Mormon might claim in distancing themselves from accusations of racism.

Abner and Martha Howell, however, were important to the church even when they could merely fill the role of “the black Mormons.” The possibility of segregated congregations was considered by church leaders, and, according to Boyd Burbridge, the Howells were invited to investigate possibilities. Carrying a letter²⁷ signed by Apostle

²⁶ Howell, tape recording.

²⁷ LeGrand Richards, Letter, June 20, 1951, in my possession, on loan to BYU’s Special Collections.

LeGrand Richards, they ventured across the United States. The letter, dated June 20, 1951, stated:

To Whom It May Concern: This will introduce to you Brother and Sister Abner L. Howell (colored) who are good members of our Church, being members of the Evergreen Ward here in Salt Lake City. Brother and Sister Howell have been faithful throughout the years and are now enjoying what they have looked forward to for a long time, namely a trip through the Southern and Eastern parts of the United States. We have invited them to call upon our people, the missionaries, and Saints wherever convenient. Any courtesies extended to them will be very much appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

LeGrand Richards.

On that trip, they met another black Mormon family—that of Len and Mary Hope. Abner spoke of them as follows—not omitting a church leader’s name:

I met [Mark Peterson] when he first became an Apostle because he told me about a Negro who raised a family in Cincinnati, and he had baptized two of their children. He asked me when I went down to Cincinnati to look this man up because he’s a wonderful man. He knows for a fact that man never fails to pay his tithing, never fails to pay his fast offerings, because he knows that eventually there will be only one Church, and that will be our Church.²⁸

²⁸ Howell, tape recording.

The Hope family had been forbidden from attending LDS church meetings in Cincinnati and so met with missionaries monthly in their home. Abner reflected on the Hopes' situation and said, "We found that society had crept [sic] into religion. Most of the members lived across the river on the Kentucky side, and some of them did not want the Negro family to come to church."²⁹ Upon presenting the letter from Elder Richards, Abner Howell was invited to speak in Sacrament meeting. The bishop counseled him to "go easy on the haters." Howell replied, "I will be so nice they will like me!" He used the same scripture which John Henry Smith had quoted to him years before: 2 Nephi 26:32—"All are alike unto God." He reported that at least one man said, "I did not know there were such things in the Book of Mormon!"³⁰

After his sermon, according to Howell, the Hope family was finally welcomed into the branch. There is no corroborating evidence for this and it is likely an exaggeration. We do know that the Hope family moved to Salt Lake City soon after the Howells' mission—in 1951. Marion Duff Hanks, who knew them from the time of his own pre-World War II mission, saw to it that they had a home. Abner and Martha Howell would still have been in Salt Lake when the Hopes arrived there, but their time together would have been fleeting, as Len Hope passed away in 1952. Is it possible that Abner Howell painted such a rosy picture of Utah that the Hope family decided to move there? Sadly, Utah was hardly immune to racism. There was some controversy about

²⁹ Carter, *Negro Pioneer*, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

whether or not Len Hope's funeral could be held in a Mormon chapel. Duff Hanks "got authority from Richard L. Evans, which 'kind of helped them decide.'"31

On May 10, 1954, one week to the day before Brown V. Board of Education was decided, Martha Perkins Howell also died. Soon thereafter, Abner moved to California and became a tour guide at the Los Angeles Temple during its public open house, December 19, 1955–February 18, 1956. He enjoyed speaking to Institute classes in California and doing firesides, and enjoyed meeting crowds who wanted to know why he was a Mormon. In a time when there were only three or four hundred black Mormons worldwide, Abner was indeed a curiosity, one who could make Mormon listeners feel better about the church's priesthood restriction. Howell said he was glad he didn't have the priesthood, as not having it meant he could not become a Son of Perdition.³² This was apparently a teaching adopted by several black converts, but one which, when repeated by religion professor Randy Bott in 2012, sounded ludicrous to those who heard it and precipitated a church statement disavowing it as doctrine. Bott, in his interview with *Washington Post's* Jason Horowitz, said, "What is discrimination? I think that is keeping something from somebody that would be a benefit for them, right? But what if it wouldn't have been a benefit to them? . . . You couldn't fall off the top of the ladder, because you weren't on the top of the ladder. So, in reality the blacks not having the priesthood was the greatest blessing God could give them."³³

³¹ Marion Duff Hanks, interviewed by Margaret Blair Young and Darius Aidan Gray, May 21, 2002.

³² Boyd Burbridge and others have indicated that Ab often answered the race issue by declaring that he "could never be a Son of Perdition" (Boyd Burbridge, interviewed by Margaret Blair Young). Abner's words are verified in Ruffin Bridgeforth's oral history, found in the Charles Redd Center, BYU.

³³ Jason Horowitz, "The Genesis of a Church's Stand on Race," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-genesis-of-a-churchs-stand-on-race/2012/02/22/gIQAQZXyfR_story.html (accessed January 6, 2014).

Apparently, when Howell suggested that as a reason for his not minding the restriction, his LDS audiences in the 1960s were placated.

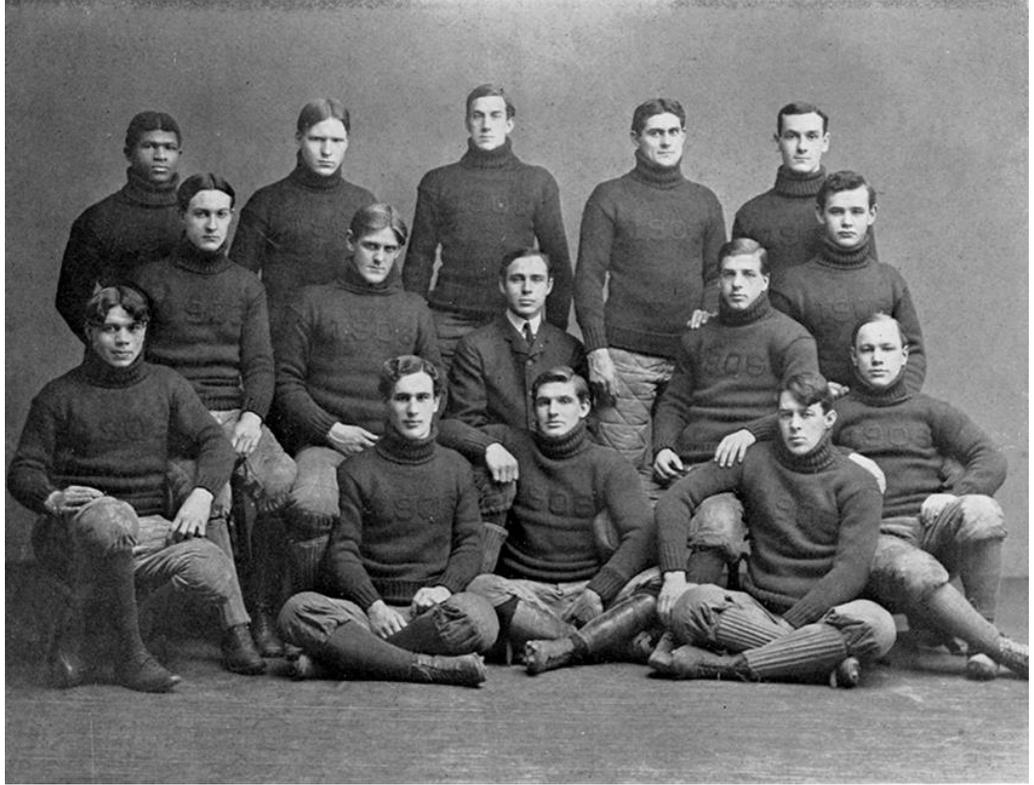
Abner returned to Utah around the time of the Watts riots (1965) and died in a rest home in 1966. He carried a special card³⁴ given to him in Los Angeles. It listed his name and proclaimed him an “honorary High Priest” of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Byrdie Howell Langon began her history of blacks in Utah two years after her brother’s death. She concluded it in 1969 with words from her A.M.E. pastor, Jerry E. Ford—words which surely apply to all of the Howell family:

On behalf of the church and the community you have served, we say we love you, not only for what you are but for what we are when we are with you. We love you for putting your hand into our heaped-up hearts and passing over all the frivolous and weak things that you cannot help but see there, and drawing out into the light all the beautiful things that many have not looked far enough to find.³⁵

³⁴ Card currently in my possession, on loan to BYU’s Special Collections.

³⁵ Langon, “Utah and the Early Black Settlers,” 40.



1902 All-Freshman Team (from 1903 *Michiganensian*)