

# HIRAM YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR ON THE SANTA FE TRAIL

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If one word describes the American West and its history, that word is diversity. It applies not only to its environment, but its people as well. Hiram Young, a free Afro-American wagon manufacturer involved in the Santa Fe trade, resided and worked in the region of the Missouri-Kansas border from 1850-1881. His life and career testify to the rich and vital ethnic diversity that made the American West a place of particularly new and exciting possibilities in the 19th century.

Hiram Young's transition from slave to wealthy, free entrepreneur began in Tennessee about 1812; the exact date of his birth is unknown. He moved to Missouri as a slave and "purchased his freedom from George Young of Greene County, Missouri, in 1847." It was said that he earned his freedom and that of his wife Matilda by whittling and selling ox yokes.

Sometime between 1847 and 1850 Young and his wife moved to the Missouri border town of Liberty, seven miles north of the Trail outfitting center of Independence. He moved to Independence in 1850, plying the trade of carpenter. It proved to be a smart move. Independence, county seat of Jackson County, was the economic center of the Santa Fe trade on the western Missouri border. The 1,500 or so citizens of the town also catered to those emigrants traveling to Oregon and California.

Due to the lobbying efforts of attorney and geopolitician William Gilpin, Independence was designated a port of entry for the Santa Fe trade in the late 1840s. Interests in the town also controlled the first regular federal mail contracts to the far West, beginning with Waldo, Hall and Co. in 1850. In 1849 a corporation of citizens had established a mule-drawn railroad to one of the two river landings that served the town. The wagon manufacturing and transportation-related industries boomed in Independence and the surrounding area; eleven wagon and carriage makers were located in Jackson County in 1850. (1) [...]

In the 1850 census Young was listed as a man with a specific trade; he was not listed as mulatto or Black. No listing of personal wealth was noted. By 1851, according to his own testimony, he had set himself up in the "manufactory of yokes and wagons—principally freight wagons for hauling govt freight across the plains." He identified his principal customers as government freight contractors.

Incredible financial success came to his business. By 1860 he was turning out thousands of ox yokes and between 800 and 900 wagons a year. He employed between 50 and 60 men at his shop on his 480-acre farm six miles east of Independence in the Little Blue Valley. In his shop in Independence Young employed approximately 20 men and maintained a substantial payroll. He owned a four-horsepower engine; few other businesses in Independence boasted such technology. Seven forges operated in the shop. Young stockpiled thousands of board feet of lumber at his wagon factory, along with 200 tons of iron, 5,000 pounds of charcoal, and 3,000 pounds of coal. The 1860 census officials noted 300 completed wagons and 6,000 yokes, the wagons being valued at \$48,000 and the yokes at \$13,500.

As a Black entrepreneur, Young proudly identified his products; he branded his wagons with "Hiram Young and Company" and added the initials of the purchaser. They were readily identifiable and generally known as "Hiram Young" wagons. Built for the Santa Fe trade, they were capable of hauling 6,000 pounds and were built for oxen drayage with generally six teams of yoked oxen to a wagon. Wagon tongues were made only for oxen. The tire tread was about 2 1/2 inches wide. Each wagon was fitted with provision boxes. (3)

Young's wagon factory was one of the largest industries in Jackson County in 1860. It was by far the largest such concern in Independence. His capital investment in the business was listed in the 1860 census as between \$30,000 and \$35,000. In addition, Young owned \$36,000 worth of real property, \$20,000 of person property, and three slaves of his own. Both white and Black men worked for Young, but the exact numbers and ratio are unknown. [...]

(4)

Young was one of the wealthiest men in Jackson County in 1860. According to James W. Gilbert's calculations, in his 1973 study of free Blacks in Missouri, Young was 56 times more wealthy than the average citizen of the county. Young described himself in a later court case as "a colored man of means." He advertised in the local papers, noting in bold type his trade as a "Manufacturer of Wagons, Ox Yokes and Bows." According to at least one of his advertisements, Young also supplied emigrants with needed items "at the shortest notice." He was well known and respected by those familiar with freighting in the West. (5) [...]

#### NOTES

1. Estate of Hiram Young, Deceased vs. The United States (No. 7320 Cong.), National Archives, hereafter cited as Young vs. U.S.; Affidavit of Hiram Young, 1881, hereafter AHY 1881; Population of the United States in 1850: Seventh Census (Abstracted by Hattie E. Poppino, 1964), 140, hereafter Seventh Census; Population of the United States in 1850: Seventh Census—Products of Industry, Jackson County, Missouri, 95-101; Thomas L. Karnes, William Gilpin: Western Nationalist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), 212-214; John D. Unruh, Jr., The Plains Across: The Overland Emigration and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 80; Pearl Wilcox, Jackson County Pioneers (by the author, 1975), 279; Louise Barry, The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Kansas Gateway to the American West, 1540-1854 (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1972), 949; William Gilpin to Robert Walker, Sec. of the Treasury, Record Group 59, National Archives.

2. Wilcox, 177; Juliet E. K. Walker, Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 42; Seventh Census, 140.

3. Young vs. U.S.; Record Book Y, 106, Jackson County Recorder's Office; Josiah Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies, ed. by Milo Milton Quaife (2d ed.; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 22-23; William Barclay Napton, Over the Santa Fe Trail in 1857 (1905; reprint, Santa Fe: Stagecoach Press, 1964), 12.

4. Ibid.; AHY 1881; Population of the United States in 1860: Eighth Census (Abstracted by Hattie E. Poppino, 1964), 76, 273; Population of the United States in 1860: Eighth Census—Products of Industry, Jackson County Missouri: Independence Missouri, 1; James W. Gilbert, "The Free Negro in Missouri, 1820-1861," (Master's thesis, University of Missouri at Kansas City, 1973), 89; Record Book Y, 106, 561, 567; Record Book X, 195, 401; Record Book W, 385; Record Book V, 103, 438, Jackson County Recorder's Office; Young vs. U.S.

5. Gilbert, 89; AHY 1881; Wilcox, 177-178.