

FROM: Blacks in the West Monograph #1
Editorial note

Although it is our Society's policy to publish historical articles pertaining to the American West we occasionally shall stray from this field when, in the interest of American Negro historical documentation, a short article has submitted which extends and corrects the fabric of Negro history elsewhere. To this end, we publish new biographical information about one of his greatest Shakespearean actors.

Ira Frederick Aldridge (1806?- 1867), by James Abajian

An authoritative biography of Aldridge was authorized in 1958 by Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock. Their prologue states "the authors hope that it will serve to stimulate others to pick up where they leave off, until this great man is given his rightful place in theatrical history, and until the fascinating story of a unique representative of the Negro people becomes known to the world."

New and reliable biographical information about Aldridge has been found in the 1867 files of the *San Francisco Elevator*. This newspaper was edited and published by the actor's classmate and correspondent, Philip A. Bell (1808 to 1899,) an all but forgotten Negro of great distinction. The *Elevator* received notification of Aldridge's death from its New York correspondent, James J. Spellman writing under the pseudonym, "Private L'Ouverture." Bell then gave an extended account of the actor in the September 20, 1867 issue of his newspaper.

Aldridge was "a jet black man," born in New York City about 1806. The New York City birthplace, about which there has been some question, appears to be further validated by the death notice of Ira's elder brother, Joshua, who was listed also as a New York City native, aged 72 years, in the latter's death notice appearing in the November 2, 1872 issue of the *Elevator*. Herbert Marshall states that the father, Daniel Aldridge, died in 1840, and his death notice appears in the October 10 issue of the New York City *Colored American*, a newspaper also published by Philip Bell.

The Negro surname, Aldridge, was not uncommon in the New York City directories before 1860. An examination of directory residence listings and other evidence leads to the assumption that the actor stepmother was named Esther, and that a second brother or nephew was named Moses Aldridge.

For an account of Aldridge's pre-theater career, Herbert Marshall relies almost solely upon James McCune Smith's biographical account published in the New York City *Anglo -African* on January, 1860. Dr. Smith is referred to as "a schoolmate of Aldridge in the African Free School," although Smith was still attending the Free School in 1826, four years following Aldridge's departure. According to Bell, both the editor and Aldridge left school together in 1822, Bell to gain further education, and Aldridge to learn the shoemaker trade. In the same year, a retired Liverpool ship steward named Brown open a theater on Mercer Street, near Houston, which permanently separated Aldridge from shoemaking. In describing Brown's theater, Marshall states,

"This appears to have been the beginning of the Negro theater in the United States, and if, like the African Free School, it had been allowed to grow, perhaps find Negro theater companies might have flourished 50 or even 100 years before they actually come into their own. So popular became Brown's theater that white people began to attend, and eventually a portion of the African theater was set aside for whites!!"

While acting at Brown's theater, Aldridge was discovered by the great Shakespearean, James W. Wollack, Sr., "Who induced him to accompanying him to England and try his fortunes in another hemisphere where prejudice against color would be no barrier to his advancement." Thus, Aldridge appears to have left New York in 1823 or 1824 with Wollack rather than "as the personal attendant" of Edmund Keen as has been stated in most biographical accounts.

Ira Aldridge's success in Europe was almost beyond belief. During a career of more than four decades, in the course of which he acquired a white wife, he was reported to have "received more decorations of honor and orders of knighthood than any actor who ever lived." James Spelman reported that Aldridge at the time of his death, had agreed to appear at New York City Academy of Music in a role supported by William Davidge and Madame Methua-Schueller. His desire to return to the United States is supported by Bell who wrote: "Before coming to California in 1860, we corresponded occasionally with Mr. Aldridge, and in one of his letters he expressed his determination to visit New York after his retirement from the stage. He was anxious once again to see his old friends and relatives."

Aldridge died in Poland on his way to an appearance in Russia. More extended accounts of his distinguished career may be found in several of the sources which follow. In San Francisco today, his name is commemorated by the Aldridge players West, and active theatrical group.

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