



1914

Ford Employs African Americans

William Perry, the first African American to work for Ford, started working at the Highland Park Plant in 1914. As time went on, more African Americans were hired, but were given the dirtiest and least desired tasks. The foundry was the most common place for African American workers, where they cast engine parts. Over time, Ford placed African Americans into other better, higher paying jobs including security, machining, and tool-and-dye making. By 1918 there were just over 1000 African Americans employed at Ford. Another 600 would join in the next three years.



¹ First African American employed by Ford Motor Company.

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² African American foundry workers at Ford Rouge Plant ID: THF23898

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³ African American foundry workers at Ford Rouge Plant ID: THF23853

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Credits:

David L. Lewis, "Working Side by Side," Michigan History, January/February, 1993

Keywords/Topics:

Work/Jobs

Questions:

1. What part of the plant did most African Americans work?
2. What jobs did Ford offer African Americans?
3. Did other auto companies hire many African Americans?
4. Why was William Perry's employment so groundbreaking?

Links to Internet Websites:

<http://www.michiganhistorymagazine.com/extra/ford/integrated.html>

<http://www.inmotionaame.org/gallery/detail.cfm?id=465407&type=image>

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William Perry met Henry Ford in 1888 when he was hired to cut wood on Henry Ford's timberland estate. Twenty-five years later, Perry went to the Highland Park plant in search of work. Henry Ford remembered him and gave him a job working the machines. When William Perry died in 1940, Henry Ford went to Perry's home and paid his last respects to his old friend.

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The factories of Ford Motor Company were the only place that black and white workers could be seen working side by side. Most auto companies segregated their workforce by keeping black workers confined to work in the foundry. William Perry's employment opened the doors for other African American workers to find employment in the auto industry.

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These African American men are working on the Fordson Tractor Assembly Line at the Ford Rouge Plant.