

1914

William Perry is the first salaried employee at Ford Motor Company

William Perry, the first known African American to work for Ford, started working at the Highland Park Plant in 1914. In the winter of 1888, Perry and Ford worked together, sharing a two-man saw on his timberland estate. Twenty-six years later, Perry visited Ford at the Highland Park Plant in search of employment after becoming ill. Beginning as a janitor, Perry worked in the Highland Park plant's powerhouse for the next twenty-six years until his death in 1940.¹ 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. Over time, Ford placed African Americans into better, higher paying jobs including security, machining, and tool-and-die making.



¹ William Perry

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² William Perry with staff at the Highland Park Plant.

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³ African American men working in the foundry.

Courtesy of the National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library

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Credits:

Lacey, Robert. *Ford: The Man and the Machine*. Little Brown and Company. Boston. 1986.

Read-Miller, Cynthia. "William Perry – First African American Hired by Ford Motor Company." The Henry Ford. September 2004.

<http://thehenryford.org/exhibits/pic/2004/september.asp>

Oral Reminiscence, Irene Johnson Talks about William Perry. July 10, 2003.

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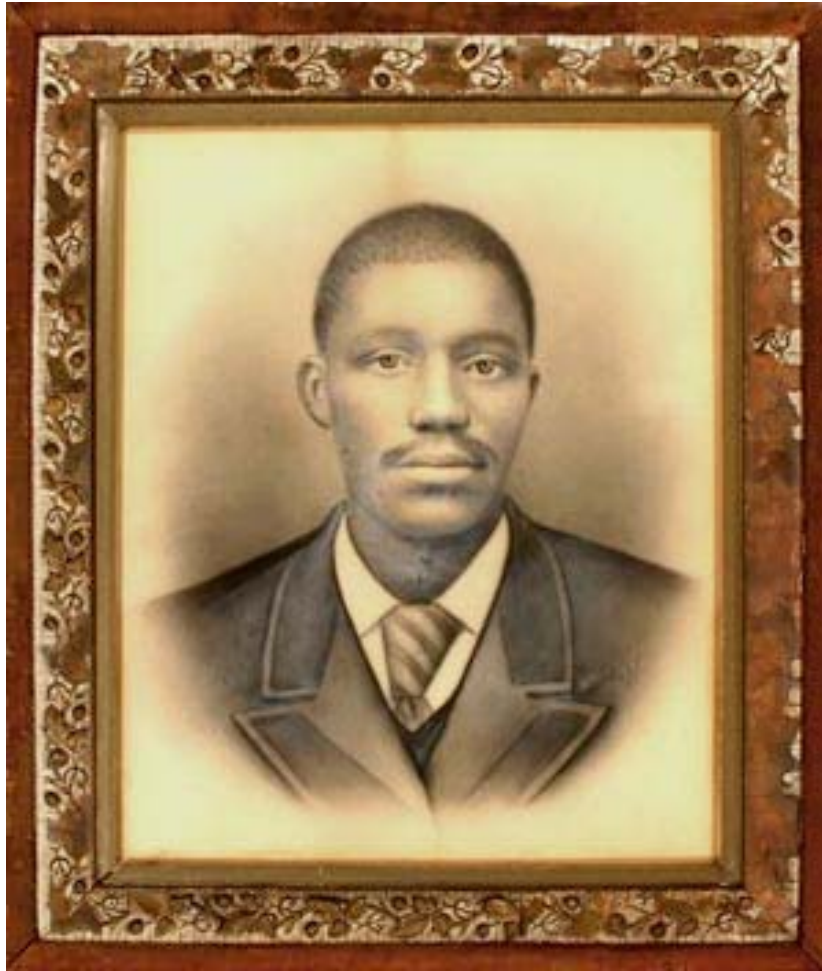
1. How did William Perry befriend Henry Ford?
2. How was William Perry's position at Ford Motor Company different than that of most blacks that worked there?
3. How did William Perry open doors for future African Americans at Ford Motor Company?

Links to Internet Websites:

<http://thehenryford.org/exhibits/pic/2004/september.asp>



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William Perry was thirty-five years old when he met Henry Ford on his timberland estate in Dearborn Township in 1888. In 1904, he moved to Detroit during a time when the African American population was very small.

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William Perry worked at Ford Motor Company in the powerhouse plant until his death at age 87 on October 9, 1940. He was on the payroll at the Highland Park plant up to that day, having worked for Ford for 26 years.

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Courtesy of the National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library

Racial discrimination and prejudice forced blacks to work the least desired jobs even after being hired. William Perry, through his work ethic and long-term friendship with Henry Ford, had unwittingly paved the way for many African American autoworkers and gave rise to Ford becoming the largest employer of African Americans in the automobile industry in the early 20th Century.

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