



Mumford Holland

Narrative for Grinnell Historical Museum

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I'm going to tell you about the life of Mumford Holland, a figure of Grinnell's history whose story has been glossed over. Mr. Holland was not related to the Renfrow family, but his story is deeply intertwined with theirs in life and death. His life has many lessons to teach us about how we respect and remember the people in our life.

Mr. Holland was born in Princeton, Kentucky, to a mother and a father. We don't know anything about his parents, but it is likely they were enslaved and Mr. Holland was born into enslavement. He left Kentucky to escape enslavement and found his way to Grinnell. Unfortunately, not many records exist of Mr. Holland's life; fewer exist of his life before 1870. We don't have a record of when he was born, but newspapers reported

he was believed to be 108 at the time of his death; which would mean he was born in 1808.

Mr. Holland served in the Union Army as a cook briefly. After this, he crossed paths with George Christian who invited him to work at the hotel he owned in Grinnell, Iowa - the Chapin House. In 1870, the Grinnell census recorded him as being a table waiter.

Grinnell is not Mr. Holland's hometown, but he lived here for the last forty years of his life. In 1878, he married a woman named Jenne Kimbone who we know nothing about except that she died before the turn of the century.

Mr. Holland was an unbelievably hard worker. He did odd jobs around town, notably one as a garbageman. He owned property which we believe he rented out on occasion to other visiting laborers. He was a recognized figure, though he was not always regarded in the most flattering sense. Most of the records of Mr. Holland appear as lighthearted newspaper anecdotes, and rarely in official records or serious stories. This suggests he was not taken seriously in town, as a man, as an elder, as a community member but rather a comic relief, a "safe" and tokenized Black presence for white community members to feel "safe" around. The general implications of the newspaper articles are that he was a nice and approachable person, despite being Black.

There is one haunting portrait of Mr. Holland in the Grinnell archives. This portrait is sophisticated and thoughtful. It stands in stark contrast to the trivial anecdotes and the lack of records. For a man who was so present in his community, his memory was not recorded or honored. But the portrait is that departure. This leads us back to his connection to the Renfrows.

In a predominantly white town, community between Black families was invaluable, and we know that Mrs. Eva Pearl Renfrow – Edith's mother – built this community for her family. She invited the visiting Rosenwald scholars, young Black men who were brought to attend Grinnell College, to have dinner with them every week – which is what drove Edith's desire to attend the college. It was a full and lively house, with piano playing and food cooking. Dinners, weddings, and funerals were hosted in this house. It comes as no surprise that she and her sister took in Mr. Holland as part of their family.

The Renfrows saw Mr. Holland as a real person, a homeowner, a widow, a resilient member of his community. They invited him into their home as early as 1911. The first account of them interacting was a newspaper story of Mrs. Eva Pearl Renfrow going into her cellar and finding an alligator. Mr. Holland was at the house during this incident. This suggests that Mr. Holland was likely a regular guest of the 511 2nd Avenue House, if he was there to witness this chance encounter.

In the final years of his life, Mr. Holland moved in with Eva Pearl Renfrow's sister, Ms. Anna Catherine Field Goode. Ms. Goode's husband, Ed Goode, died in 1901 and asked Mr. Holland to look out for his son, William. Mr. Holland financially supported William Goode through the income of his properties, and left him his assets after his death. Ultimately, William Goode did not receive any assets from Mr. Holland's will because he was a minor but the intention was not lost. He was still well supported through the income of Mr. Holland's property. Henry B. Lucas, who is also intertwined with the Renfrow family, was responsible for executing Mr. Holland's will. Mrs. Renfrow received money from the liquidation of Mr. Holland's assets as a result of their almost year-and-a-half of caring for him, which she used solely to buy his house. The probate is messy and complicated, but our understanding is Mr. Holland invited the Renfrows back to Grinnell with the agreement that they would take care of him, and he would leave them their house. This is what happened, just through a more complicated route, with no objection from any parties – Mr. Holland likely just wasn't able to put it into writing.

The great task of caring for Mr. Holland in his final years and also ensuring that his life and assets after death were taken care of were assumed by the Renfrow family. He is buried in the Goode plot.

Anna Catherine Craig Goode owns this plot. *(The name on the tombstone is Anna Crag Brown. Craig is misspelled and Brown was her last name at the time of death as she later married Solomon Brown.)*

Frankie Goode, Anna's foster son who died very young and tragically in 1901, is also buried here.

Her husband, Edward Goode, – the one who asked Mr. Holland to watch William – died in 1901. He is buried there.

Eliza Jane Craig – Eva Pearl and Anna's mother, Edith's grandmother – died in 1924. She is buried in this plot.

The significance of this should not be lost on us. Ms. Goode buried Mr. Holland with her departed mother, her husband, and her son. Mr. Holland was a part of the Goode-Renfrow family and legacy.

The portrait of Mr. Holland is small, but significant. In this photo there is a life of a resilient man who survived the most horrendous conditions and died surrounded by a family who loved him and cared for him. The Grinnell Historical Museum has a mural of

Grinnell's most significant places and faces. The five faces on it are J.B. Grinnell, the three other founders, and Mr. Holland. This reminds us that Mr. Holland is Grinnell's history. Whoever painted that mural decided he was as significant in our history as the namesake of our town. For how important he is, his story has not been told, but I hope we can start to honor him in our future.



When I think about Mr. Holland – who lived and was still independent, vibrant, going out on his own – at 108, I think about the wonderful Mrs. Edith Renfrow Smith who is alive at 109. Her mother, Eva Pearl Renfrow was intentional and adamant about making sure her children got an education, were self-sufficient, and confident in themselves. I'm sure she expressed this sentiment to Mr. Holland. He played a huge hand in influencing and contributing to their future, including them moving into his house. He would have known the four oldest Renfrow children, who were 12, 10, 9, and 7, at the time of his death. He would have been around when Mrs. Edith Renfrow was born. I would pose to you this vision that I like to come back to: Mr. Holland holding two year old Edith Renfrow, imagining a radically different future for her, a future where she grew up and excelled in her elementary and high school education, where she graduated from one of the most prestigious colleges in the country, where she got married and had two daughters, where she built a beautiful life for herself in Chicago. Where a state-of-the-art building would bear her family name for centuries in honor of her remarkable legacy. If only he could see her now.

<https://arcg.is/LO10m> This StoryMaps (unfinished) has more of the story of Holland, as well as a comprehensive bibliography of sources about Holland.