BLACK FREEDOM COLONIES

IN MCLENNAN COUNTY

(1865 – 1895)

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After 19 June 1865, eleven communities of Black Freedom Colonies began to emerge within McLennan County. Although a vast majority of the four million former slaves were ill prepared, penniless, homeless, and illiterate they were spiritually motivated to work harder as freedmen than they had ever worked as slaves.

The eleven communities were founded peacefully, orderly and did nothing to further endanger President Lincoln's original plans of assimilating millions of former enslaved people into American society. Ironically, the Freedom Colonies in McLennan County became the quintessential examples of America's best liberated Black communities.

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Emancipation brought with it multiple problems for newly freed slaves faced with trying to earn a living without any resources. President Lincoln had the wisdom and foresight to create a new federal agency: **Freedmen's Bureau**, which would provide the training, education, and trade skills four million ex-slaves needed to adapt to living as free men and free women.

Shockingly, within 43 days following the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau, President Lincoln was assassinated leaving control of the Bureau in the hands of U.S. Army General, Oliver Otis Howard. Howard was well-known as the "Christian General" who would later go on to founding and serving as the first president of Howard University and supervising the establishment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

The Freedmen's Bureau employed hundreds of freedmen and Northern whites to manage, teach, coordinate and facilitate a vast humanitarian and educational enterprise executed primarily for the benefit of former slaves from all 17 southern and Border States and the District of Columbia. It served as the nation's first Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) program.

Before the Civil War, it was a crime to teach slaves to read and write. After the Civil War, Freedmen's Bureau schools were overflowing with freedmen, old and young.

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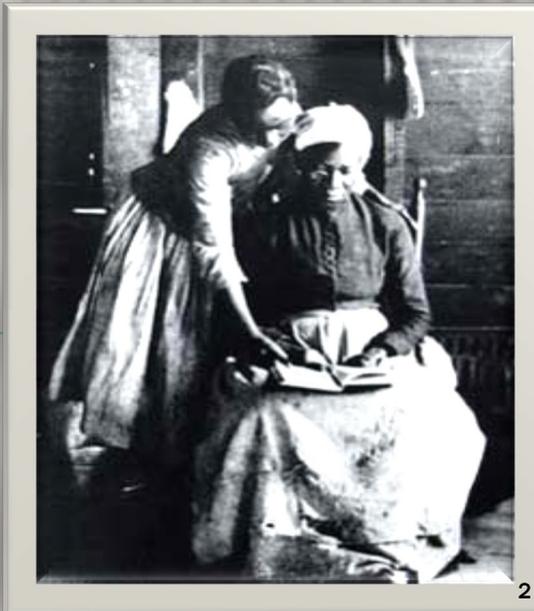
Of the four million slaves in the Southern states, the 1850 census noted that Texas contained 58,558 of them (27.5 percent of the State's population). By the end of 1870, the Freedmen's Bureau had 150 schools, 196 teachers, and 9,086 students trained in Texas.

Also, in 1870 the Freedmen's Bureau closed after five years of operation. Most of the Bureau's success came in the field of education and establishing schools. Many historians concede that educating Blacks in Texas would not have been possible so soon without the foundation laid by the Freedmen's Bureau.

The Bureau's master plan, however, omitted a consistent way to establish thousands of other freedom settlements or colonies throughout the South. Each community appears to adapt whatever means at their disposal to implement and represent as best they could, the symbolic archetype of of the original Freedmen's Bureau model.

The writer's research uncovered eleven self-sufficient, all-Black communities founded by newly liberated slaves, which he dubbed Freedom Colonies. They were established between 1865 and 1895 and yielded a total of 28 African American churches made up of four denominations:
- Missionary Baptist
- United Methodist
- African Methodist Episcopal
- Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America
These so-called "Elite Eleven" communities collectively succeeded in duplicating the responsibilities carried out initially by the Freedmen's Bureau and after three decades were able to complete the work they had started in 1865!

Chalk Bluff Community

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Before the Civil War, slaves labored within every Anglo-American community of the County, living apart from their owners, but still carrying out their daily assigned duties as chattel property. After Emancipation, most whites were opposed to Blacks living right next door to them because it would appear that the races were indeed equal. Hence, newly freed slaves were relegated to living in relatively safe, but spatially separated communities created largely in accordance with restrictions imposed on them by the majority.

During the first 30 years after Emancipation, virtually all 28 churches carried out their roles in the same way as the Freedmen's Bureau, but without arousing the animosity, contempt, and anger of whites.

Coupled with a strong desire to own their own land, gain self autonomy, and to live free from violence, early Black settlers viewed education as the key to their progress from enslavement to freedom. All eleven communities received nearly no official or formal support from Anglo-Americans and were isolated and on their own.

All Black Freedom Colonies had three signature anchors in common: one or more churches, a school, and one community cemetery. These three anchors provided the best means to distinguish Freedom Colonies from other Black enclaves that had farmers, landowners, no clergy, and no faith community infrastructure.

GRIOTS. It would not be possible to uncover the details of the Black pioneer trailblazers of these communities without the aid of several crucial modern-day *griots*. Since so few Black could read or write during this era, written records pertaining to the history of these communities were practically none existent. [Griots are descendants of West Africans story-tellers who were charged with preserving the oral histories and folk lore of their particular tribe]. Most of the griots I interviewed enabled me to uncover relevant information that normal people too often forgot because griots processed extraordinary mental capabilities.

Community	Churches	School	Cemeteries
1. Robinsonville (1852)	St. Paul MBC (1882)	Inactive	Robinson Cemetery (1881)
2. Greater Bosqueville (1865)	Greater Bosqueville	Inactive	Greater Bosqueville Cemetery (1870) Kimmonsville Cem. moved here (1940s)
3. Willow Grove (1871)	Willow Grove	Inactive	Willow Grove Cemetery (1880)
4. Gholson (1872)	Pleasant Grove	Inactive	Pleasant Grove Cemetery (1872)
5. Harrison's Switch (1873)	Spring Hill Church (1866) Pilgrim Rest BC (1870) Goshen CPCA (1897) Holder's Chapel AME (1887)	Inactive Inactive Inactive No	Spring Hill Cemetery (1866) Pilgrim Rest Cemetery (1870) Goshen Cemetery (1890)
6. Elm Mott (1874)	Bush Chapel CPCA New Zion MBC New Hope MBC (1889)	Inactive No No	Elm Mott Cemetery (1874)
7. Chalk Bluff (1881)	Zion Hill MBC (1881) (relocated to Waco in 1971)	Inactive	Zion Hill Memorial Cemetery (1881)
8. Downsville (1866)	Mt. Pleasant MBC (1866) Mt. Olive MBC (1884) Mt. Zion MBC ** (1898)	Inactive Inactive Inactive	Mt. Pleasant Cemetery (1866) Mt. Olive Cemetery (1884) Mt. Zion Cemetery (1898 - Closed)
9. North Waco (1865)	New Hope MBC (1866) Mt. Zion UMC * (1866) Lover's Leap MBC (1865) St. Paul AME (1891) Edwards Chapel AME (1896)	Inactive Inactive No Inactive No	Lover's Leap Cemetery (1865) Lake Waco displaced Kimmonsville 1940s Cobbs-Walker Cemetery (Private-Closed, 1853)
10. South Waco (1874)	Bracks Chapel UMC * (1876) Union MBC (1892) St. James UMC (1874-2016) Closed	No Inactive Inactive	First Street Cemetery (1852) (First opened to Blacks in 1882)
11. East Waco (1872)	East Waco CPCA (1874) Toliver Chapel MBC (1895) St. Luke AME (1886) Pleasant Olive MBC (1885) Second Baptist MBC (1879) Pleasant Grove MBC (1872) (located on Waco Loop 340)	No No No Inactive No Inactive	Greenwood Cemetery (1875) Doris Miller Memorial Cemetery (1950s)

(Second Baptist moved from South Waco to East Waco in 2004)

Map of Elite 11 Locations

1. Robinsonville Community (1852)
2. Greater Bosqueville Community (1865)
3. Willow Grove Community (1871)
4. Gholson Community (1872)
5. Harrison's Switch Community (1873)
6. Elm Mott Community (1874)
7. Chalk Bluff Community (1881)
8. Downsville Community (1866)
9. WACO: North Waco Community (1865)
10. WACO: South Waco Community (1874)
11. WACO: East Waco Community (1872)

In 1866, newly freed slaves began migrating into McLennan County in large numbers seeking jobs in an urban center to earn wages, eager to own outright their own fertile farm land and work as share croppers and, tenant farmers to take advantage of the increasing value of cotton as a cash crop.

Inez Harris-Easley (Chalk Bluff *Griot*) [1930 – present]

Bosqueville School for African-Americans
This 1888 school building, which had been the Bosqueville School, was moved to Steinbeck Bend Road around 1930 and became the African-American School. Photo courtesy of The Texas Collection, Baylor University. We believe it was demolished in 1983.