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Dunlap and the Exoduster Connection

Jan Houston

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FREEDOM TO THE SLAVE
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Dunlap and the Exoduster Connection

Following the Civil War, Federal troops remained in the South, maintaining order and overseeing the Reconstruction period. Black freedmen trusted that they would gain the rights of free men everywhere: the right to vote, the right to education, the right to land ownership.



But following the removal of Federal troops in 1877, the South entered a phase known as Redemption. White Southerners sought to regain control over Blacks. In short order Blacks lost hope for a new and brighter future in the South. They resisted beatings, exhibiting independence and fearlessness and showing that they understood that they wanted to do for themselves and act in their own interests. Farming one's own land meant being one's own master. Southern determination that Blacks must not own farmland at any cost

matched the freedmen's desire to own it.

By the winter of 1878-1879, word passed quickly among Blacks of an Exodus to Kansas, the promised land articulated by John Brown prior to the Civil War. Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, a self-styled organizer from Tennessee, proclaimed Kansas to be the new Zion, a place of freedom from slavery, a place of land ownership and civil rights. Singleton scouted the Dunlap uplands (four miles southwest of the 2012 Symphony in the Flint Hills concert site) in the mid-1870s, securing an agreement for bringing a

group of black immigrants to settle in the area. Since the best land had been taken immediately after the Kaw Indians left in 1872, what land remained to be settled was upland. Singleton may have misjudged its erratic climate. Averaging 33.6 inches of rainfall a year, this amount seemed adequate, but rainy Junes are often followed by a long summer drought. In addition thin soils and rocky hillsides favored stock raising rather than farming. However, in May of 1878, Singleton and about 200 black settlers moved to the Dunlap vicinity. Colonists made small down payments on 40-acre and 80-acre claims costing between \$1.25 and \$2.00 an acre, agreeing to pay the debt over a period of six years at 6% interest. No one block of land sufficient for the entire colony was found, so four distinct settlements were created around Dunlap.

The Great Exodus of 1879 was promoted by Singleton who distributed circulars to thousands of southern Blacks promoting "Sunny Kansas." Rumors spread promising every freedman \$500,

forty acres, a mule, first-class hotels on their journey, and apples as big as grapefruits. That summer more than 20,000 Exodusters migrated to various parts of Kansas, perhaps as many as a thousand to the Dunlap area.

Governor John St. John and others established the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association in May 1879 to aid destitute freedmen, refugees, and emigrants coming into the state. Two local agencies, the Presbyterian Church and the Freedmen's Aid Association of Dunlap, played major roles in locating Blacks in the Dunlap area. Rev. John M. Snodgrass of the Associate Presbyterian Synod of North America was appointed missionary to the black people of Dunlap, Kansas. He opened the Freedmen's Academy of Kansas, known locally as the Colored Academy in 1880. Two teachers were also assigned to the school. In 1882 the Academy served 90 male and 85 female students, of whom 45 were listed as ex-slaves.

In September 1879 approximately 1500 black and white settlers attended



PAP SINGLETON
Kansas State Historical Society

an Emancipation Day celebration and barbeque for the benefit of the Exodusters. Of no surprise some local hostility developed when some white folks felt that bountiful state aid gave black settlers a competitive advantage. School District 40 in Dunlap was divided with white students attending the schoolhouse of the district and black students using a room in the Academy building. Black and white families alike experienced poor crops and difficulties farming in 1881. Some early immigrants left for better living conditions, but a supporter of John Brown and the abolitionist cause from Maine bequeathed 240 acres to be given to the Dunlap Colony. This land southwest of Dunlap was divided into 5-acre and 10-acre plots for the accommodation of as many of the homeless families as possible. In 1882 a Topeka couple donated additional land northeast of Dunlap, partitioning it into 32 five-acre lots. Only six families took claims in this subdivision. Unfortunately, given the poor land quality, these small plots would not sustain a family.

Gradually benefactors became hard to find and aid diminished to a trickle. By 1889 the Academy sold most of its real estate holdings, and a year later Missionary Snodgrass moved away and retired. The black population diminished only slightly from 90 families in the area in 1885 to 86 families in 1895. Over the next decade, however, the black population declined by over 50%. As happened all over rural Kansas, citizens both black and white gradually left the farm and moved to cities. Black children began attending integrated schools in Dunlap after World War I.

Throughout the early years of the 20th century, Dunlap experienced a building boom. A large attractive stone city hall was built on Main Street, and two new brick schools, a grade school and a 4-year high school, replaced the burned-out old stone school. A department store, grocery store, a Farmers Union Co-op, drug store, an opera house, a funeral parlor, restaurants, a blacksmith shop, a car dealership, at least two filling stations, two banks, a livery barn, a mercantile company, and



CHARLES AND JENNIE SINGLETON HARNESS
The first black family in the reservation area and grandparents of London Harness
 Courtesy Art and Gen Harness

a hotel for visitors arriving at the Katy Railroad Depot all provided the usual services of a small town. In 1920 there were two black churches and several white churches. A stone quarry near town and regular passenger and heavy freight traffic on the railroad provided a demand for labor and shipping.

Graduates of Dunlap High School always fondly recalled “mingling” without prejudice, participating equally in school affairs. School pictures show black and white students playing in the school band. Dunlap football teams

were respected throughout the county for their athletic prowess and speedy performers. Americus High School lost its 1930 football game with Dunlap with a humiliating score of 100-0, resulting in the Americus school board voting to end their participation in football, giving all of their football equipment to Dunlap.

Blacks held their last Emancipation Day ceremony and barbeque in Dunlap on September 22, 1931. This important celebration was a tie for families to celebrate not only their freedom, but it was also an opportunity to make social

contacts with friends and relatives who returned to mark this important day. Kin helped pool resources to aid those in need. It was also a channel that alerted black workers to employment opportunities. Contacts with white officials at Emancipation Day also helped resolve local problems in a rare forum where black folks were the majority. Much planning went into this yearly event, honored by Blacks in Dunlap and all over the country as the anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

With the closure of the bank in the early 1940s, the Depression and World War II, plus numerous floods, Dunlap gradually declined into merely a wide spot in the road.

The Katy Railroad ended its passenger traffic through Dunlap in 1952, eventually tearing up their tracks in 1957. Two black churches remained open in Dunlap until the early 1950s, but each was supported by only a handful of families. Today the badly weathered black Baptist Church still stands, the only

evidence of a once vigorous community. The black Methodist Church building was sold to the Roberts family of Strong City and stands east of the rodeo grounds made famous by that family. The high school closed in 1962, and the grade school, damaged by a storm that ripped off its roof, closed in 1978.

Today, most of the businesses along Main Street have been torn down to eliminate vandalism. The elevator and the fire station remain, along with a few foundations and crumbling sidewalks.

In recent years the volunteer fire department of Dunlap undertook the renovation of the high school gym, which is now available for rent for activities and events. The Dunlap United Methodist Church still holds services every Sunday. But the last black man of the Dunlap area, London Harness, died in 1992. All neighbors in the Dunlap area recognized Harness and his wife Anna as the most hospitable and honorable couple around.

While establishing a black farming community in Kansas ultimately failed,

it was a success in allowing individual black families to escape poverty in the South and overcrowding in big cities. It established an enduring social and economic network that enabled the first generations to get a start from which future generations of family members learned, worked, and moved on to new opportunities.

Although the story of Dunlap is unique in some details, it also represents

the decline of many rural villages. Founded on the hopes and dreams of settlers moving west into new territory, this small town has seen its destiny flourish and then decline when the needs of the country turned to larger farming and ranching operations, when local population dispersed, and when dependency on technology increased.

Jan Huston. Refer to page 43.



Courtesy Library of Congress