

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

“WE WANTS A TOWN”
COMMUNITY, RACE, AND CULTURE IN THE FOUNDING OF TWO OF OKLAHOMA’S
ALL-BLACK TOWNS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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Norman, Oklahoma

2025

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A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Acknowledgements

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Mr. Ron Graham, descendant of Joe Hutton Sr. and founder of two Muscogee Freedmen groups, for his willingness to share his extensive research on the history of his family and African Creek history. When I called him, he eagerly offered to share the research he has been compiling for years. We were able to speak in person once and he emailed me 100 slides of an over 700 slide long presentation he has built. Many portions of this thesis would not have been possible without his expertise, and I am deeply thankful for his willingness to share with me.

Another supremely important figure in the completion of my thesis is Mr. Clarence Baccus Jr., grandson of William and Rebella Baccus and the great-great-grandson of Joe Hutton Sr. Mr. Baccus is the Historian and Executive Director of the Vernon Chamber of Commerce and wrote the histories on the town chamber's website. We spoke over the phone and exchanged emails and his knowledge of both his family's and his town's histories deeply enriched my understanding of my topic. My discussion of Joesph Hutton Sr and William and Rebella Baccus would not have been possible without his extensive historical research.

I also want to thank my co-advisors, Dr. Elizabeth Browning and Dr. Kalenda Eaton. Dr. Browning was incredibly helpful in guiding me along the thesis project process. Dr. Eaton, whom I worked under from 2022-2024 as a graduate research assistant on the Oklahoma Black Homesteaders project, sharpened me by consistently challenging my (often ill-thought out) conclusions and by guiding me to important work done by the scholars who came before me.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to thank my parents for their unwavering support. As I have pursued my masters degree(s), they have supported me financially and emotionally, but this support has not only come the past few years, from my first steps to my many educational endeavors, they have unfailingly been my greatest supporters. Without them, I would

not have been able to graduate debt free with my bachelors, and I certainly would not be nearing the end of my dual masters program similarly debt free. I cannot thank them enough for their endless love and support.

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the founding of two of Oklahoma's All-Black towns, Vernon and Huttonville, as a case study for the way that race and ethnicity interact in Black communities from the 1860s to the 1910s. It also examines the role that citizenship and landownership played in identity formation and expression in early Oklahoma history. The cultural differences between African Americans and African Creeks initially precluded kinship and community ties based on a shared racial identity. African Creeks did not view their experiences in the Muscogee Nation as similar enough to the experiences of African Americans in the United States to form communal bonds with incoming African American migrants. The founders of Huttonville did not advertise their town as a space for African Americans to start a new life, nor did they advertise the land as available for sale. So, African American migrants founded their own towns, like Vernon. However, as statehood approached, the racist actions of White settlers made it clear that in order to protect their access to land- which they viewed as the key to autonomy and citizenship- they would need to form inter-cultural alliances and take political action to protect their civil rights.

Introduction

“The horrible things the colored man is subjected to in some portions of this country, the prejudice he is forced to confront, how he is humiliated, segregated and treated as a brute, when this is taken into consideration, the promoters and builders of exclusive Negro towns come in the class of liberators, true race benefactors and... must have been inspired from above.”

Topeka Plaindealer, April 28, 1916

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“How did you hear about Huttonville?” was the question asked with surprise to me by Clarence L. Baccus Jr., the historian and executive director for the Vernon Chamber of Commerce when I told him about my plan to write a thesis about the towns of Vernon and Huttonville. I told him how I had learned about Huttonville in my first semester of my graduate studies, when I was working on a group project about the connections between all-Black towns and Tulsa’s Greenwood district in a public history course. One of our contacts had family from the Huttonville area and I took on the task of uncovering more about the small community. It was hard work, as Huttonville has always been a small community. Most of the scholarship on Black towns overlooks it completely. Vernon has received a similar fate, despite being one of the thirteen actively incorporated Black towns in Oklahoma.

Huttonville and Vernon are two historically all-Black towns in Oklahoma founded in 1895 and 1910, respectively, in McIntosh County, within the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. Hannibal Johnson’s foundational work on Black towns, *Acre of Aspiration*, includes only two short paragraphs on Vernon and three lines about Huttonville.¹ Despite the inattention they have received from scholars of Black towns, these communities represent a significant and understudied phenomenon in Oklahoma history: cultural diversity within Black communities. This thesis highlights the role that cultural differences between African Creeks and African

¹ Hannibal Johnson, *Acre of Aspiration: The All-Black Towns of Oklahoma*, (Fort Worth: Eakin Press, 2002).

Americans played in the foundation of Oklahoma's Black towns by examining how those differences drove the two groups to establish separate towns, as with the founding of Huttonville, an African Creek town, and Vernon, an African American one.

Although they shared prescriptively similar racial characteristics, African Creeks and African Americans had markedly different cultures. African Creeks lived in a different nation, experienced a different form of slavery than Americans—when they were enslaved—and spoke a different language.² Until the Reconstruction Era, many African Creeks, especially those born after Removal in the 1830s, had interacted with American citizens only as foreigners; some African Creeks participated in international relationships as translators, and many were involved in trade and diplomacy.³ Following Reconstruction and the new treaty with the U.S. signed in 1866, these interactions took on a new form as American citizens came to Indian Territory not to trade, but to settle. As American citizens began to flood into the Muscogee Nation, non-Black Muscogees began to enforce a more rigid racial hierarchy that excluded African Creeks from a community they had been a part of for over two centuries. In order to protect themselves, African Creeks began to form their own communities, establishing the earliest Black townships, to protect themselves from rising the racial vitriol surrounding them. When these communities were initially established, they did not include African Americans. In fact, African Creeks felt strong antipathy toward African Americans, a shock to African American newcomers who expected to be received as kin by Afro-Indigenous people when they arrived in the area.

² I will explore Muscogee slavery more in chapter 1, but it is important to note that Muscogee slavery was not benevolent or “better” than American/Southern slavery. Any system in which people are held in bondage and forced to labor for others is malicious, regardless of the race or ethnicity of the captors.

³ Gary Zellar, *African Creeks: Estelvyte and the Creek Nation*, Race and Culture in the American West, Volume 1 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 21-22, 31.

Fleeing rising racial violence, economic constriction, social debasement, and political disenfranchisement in the South, African Americans arrived in the Twin Territories—Indian Territory, founded in 1830, and Oklahoma Territory, founded in 1889—hopeful for change. The end of Reconstruction and implementation of “Black Codes” in many Southern states had dashed their dreams of landownership, so they set their sights West. Town developers, who arrived first in Kansas and Texas and traveled to the area, bought land and began to promote the idea of all-Black towns in the Twin Territories as the solution to the social and economic plight African Americans were facing. These new towns, according to promotional materials, were places where African Americans could be landowners and invest their money in economies that valued them. When they arrived in the area, they were surprised to not be welcomed into African Creek kinship networks and existing towns, but nevertheless adapted, establishing new towns whose economies centered around agriculture.

In the face of rising racism in the state, African Creeks and African Americans began to overlook cultural differences and form social and political alliances. This newfound racial solidarity did not come from new idealistic views of identity, but rather a need for safety and community in the face of festering racism in Oklahoma. It was not uncommon for pragmatism to override the ideology of racial separatism in rural spaces in a multitude of interracial interactions. For example, the school in Huttonville had Black, Native, and White enrollees as early as 1925, nearly 30 years before the *Brown v the Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, despite the extant laws prohibiting “racial mixing” in schools.⁴ If the need for their children to receive an education superseded the need to prevent interactions between races for

⁴ Copy of Enumeration Report for School District number 35, 1925, Huttonville School Records, McIntosh County Clerk. “Segregation in Schools,” Oklahoma Education, Oklahoma Historical Society, <https://www.okhistory.org/learn/education3#:~:text=Most%20schools%20remained%20segregated%20into,federal%20court%20cases%20Dowell%20v.>

White parents, it is not surprising that the need for protection against racist ideologies superseded the need to keep African Creek and African American cultures distinct among both groups.

My work intervenes in three historiographical literatures: Indigenous, Black, and Oklahoma history. Central to this thesis is the understanding of settler colonialism and the way it shaped Oklahoma. Native scholars—and Native peoples—have long recognized and lived with the realities of settler colonialism prior to Australian historian Patrick Wolfe providing an academic framework for understanding this systemic process. Wolfe defines settler colonialism as a structure rather than an event; the structure “destroys to replace,” and “erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base.”⁵ Wolfe’s definition of settler colonialism moved the concept from one of an event that has passed to an ongoing system of injustice that continuously shapes the society built on the stolen land.

Scholars continue to build on Wolfe’s well-established theoretical framework of settler colonialism to understand how the process is felt by non-Indigenous people of color and how it intersects with white supremacy. In *I’ve Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land*, Alainna Roberts describes settler colonialism as having a “dual nature” of both “spatial occupation and white supremacy.”⁶ Roberts’ analysis of settler colonialism focuses on the rhetoric used by colonizers to justify Indigenous dispossession and explores the ways in which settler colonialism goes beyond Indigenous and White relations and includes other communities of color.

Historians Mary Mendoza and Traci Brynne Voyles build on this description and propose the concept of “white settler supremacy” in their new work, *Not Just Green, Not Just White*:

⁵ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 387–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

⁶ Roberts, *I’ve Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land*. 3.

Race, Justice, and Environmental History, allowing the often separately described phenomena of white supremacy and settler colonialism to be understood together and processed in a way that describes more than just Indigenous and White relations. White settler supremacy contends that “settler colonialism created a context for white supremacy,” and used a series of tools to establish a settler culture based on racial domination.⁷ This framework, used in their edited volume to discuss relationships between communities of color and the environment, can be applied to this study to understand how the white settler supremacy mindset shaped concepts of racial hierarchy and social interaction in Indian Territory and later Oklahoma.

This study also contends with how the federal government introduced the concept of blood quantum into Indigenous communities and what this meant for Black Indigenous members of these communities. Katherine Ellinghaus’ *Blood Will Tell: Native Americans and Assimilation Policy* contends that the United States used blood quantum policy to justify the dispossession of Native people by narrowing down who could claim Indigeneity. I expand on this argument through my discussion of the Freedmen rolls, a secondary set of Dawes rolls that were officially created to document the citizenship of adopted freedpeople, but were unofficially used to disregard the Indigenous heritage of many Afro-Indigenous peoples and separate them from the land.

Several scholars reject the notion that Black Indigenous folks' identity can be fragmented and analyzed separately by scholars of Black and Indigenous histories, as these interconnected experiences form a unique and indivisible whole. Gary Zellar, in *African Creeks: Estelivste and the Creek Nation*, thoroughly details the history of African Creeks from initial contact in the 16th century to Oklahoma statehood in 1907. Zellar’s study is foundational to the field of Black Creek

⁷ Mary E. Mendoza and Traci Voyles, eds., *Not Just Green, Not Just White: Race, Justice, and Environmental History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2025), 3-4.

history. This thesis builds on Zellar's work through close examination of African Creek talwas and the later foundation of Black towns by African Creeks and by contrasting the foundation of Huttonville, an African Creek town, with Vernon, an African American town.

This thesis builds upon Alaina Roberts book to show how Muscogee (Creek) freedmen had different experiences with settler colonialism than Chickasaw freedmen. Roberts argues that freedpeople of the Five Tribes—the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole—used settler colonial rhetoric to beseech the U.S. to intervene in tribal matters so they could have access to land because it was the only way they could access the tribal estate and maintain connection to it.⁸ Many scholars have lauded Roberts' work as groundbreaking in the field of Afro-Indigenous studies, and her unique frame of understanding settler colonialism as a rhetorical process that can be engaged in by a multitude of peoples, including the people it would dispossess, is a significant contribution to the historiography of freedpeople in the Chickasaw Nation. However, I do not agree that Roberts's conclusions in chapter 2 hold for freedpeople in every Indigenous nation in Indian Territory. African Creeks did not seek to weaponize the rhetoric of settler colonialism against the Muscogee Nation, nor did they seek to invite U.S. takeover of the territory. African Creeks were so thoroughly enmeshed in Muscogee life, with pockets of anti-Black exclusion rather than a collective movement of it as existed in the Chickasaw Nation, that they did not see the federal government as a potential ally against oppressors. Rather, they sided with Muscogee traditionalists and resisted allotment and the

⁸ The term "Five Tribes" is often used to discuss the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole Nations who were forcibly removed from the Southeast region of what is now the United States in the 1830s to Indian Territory. During the 1830s, these groups were known as the "Five Civilized Tribes;" they were moderately well-known groups that had, according to U.S. policymakers and citizens, assimilated to a point that they had become "civilized." Because there is much that connects these groups in histories of Indian Territory, the term "Five Tribes" is still used to discuss these groups concurrently. However, because the notion that Indigenous people are uncivilized is deeply rooted in white supremacy, scholars typically drop the word "civilized" from the moniker.

takeover of federal authority because they understood that if the land opened to the U.S., White settlers would come in and bring their hierarchal racial expectations with them. In short, they viewed the United States government, not their own, as the dispossessing and disenfranchising force.

Tiya Miles, a preeminent historian in the field of Afro-Indigenous history and slavery in Indigenous Nations, has significantly shaped my work. Her work on Afro-Indigenous history has primarily focused on Afro-Cherokee histories. Her 2006 volume co-edited with Sharon Holland, *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: African Diaspora in Indian Country*, presents a critical and still timely argument on the intersection of Black and Indigenous histories. Miles and Holland contend that work on Black Indigenous populations remains significant because of Native America's centrality to the lives of African-descended peoples.⁹ To ignore Indigenous America in the history of Black people in America is to ignore and discount the lives and stories of thousands, if not millions.

Furthermore, the way that histories of racial hierarchy are complicated by the incorporation of Indigenous America in the history of Black Americans can be seen in the work of Claudio Saunt. In *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family*, Saunt argues that abiding by the American racial hierarchy was a survival strategy employed by Native people.¹⁰ This was an option available to them because the American racial hierarchy did not place them at the metaphorical bottom, so their strategy included subjugating and excluding African-descended peoples. Without the ability to abide by the racial hierarchy in a way that

⁹ Tiya Miles and Sharon Patricia Holland, *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country*, 1st ed. (Durham: Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3. See also Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story*, and *The Cherokee Rose: A Novel of Gardens and Ghosts*.

¹⁰ Claudio Saunt, *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

benefitted them, African- descended peoples subverted the expectations of the racial hierarchy by forming insular communities that allowed them to have a measure of political and economic independence. African Creeks allied with African Americans only after the Muscogee Creek nation rejected them and Oklahoma legislators subjected them to the insulting measures of Jim Crow.

African- descended peoples were able to form these communities by becoming landowners. In *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929*, David Chang delves into the complex history of landownership in the Muscogee Nation as it transitioned during Removal, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Dawes Era, Oklahoma statehood, and the Depression. My analysis builds upon Chang's focus on the politics of race in Muscogee landowning culture by examining the interplay of race, culture, and landownership in the Black town movement.

My discussion of race and culture in the Black town movement is partially inspired by the work of Angela Walton-Raji, another scholar with a major impact on the field of Afro-Indigenous studies. Walton-Raji, a forestanding genealogist and historian, has written numerous volumes on Indigenous freedmen. Her most recent work, "Freedmen Settlements of Indian Territory and Three Freedmen Community Clusters," extends our understanding of Black towns by exploring freedmen communities established two decades before the opening of Oklahoma Territory.¹¹ This thesis builds on her work by exploring the history of Huttonville, another one of these communities. Together, mine and Walton-Raji's work demonstrate the central role that Indigenous freedpeople played in Oklahoma's Black town movement and show that Black towns in the area predate even the organization of Oklahoma Territory.

¹¹ Angela Walton-Raji. "Freedmen Settlements of Indian Territory and Three Freedmen Community Clusters." *Great Plains Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (Summer 2023): 253-266.

This thesis also builds on the work of scholars in the field of African American studies. It borrows the framework of collective autonomy and community resilience, a form of everyday resistance conceptualized by sociologist and professor of environmental justice, Monica White. In *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*, White argues that everyday resistance is an understudied effort by Black people to improve their social and economic standing without disrupting existing systems. She ties collective autonomy and community resilience (CACR) to farming cooperatives established in the Jim Crow south by Black farmers.¹² This thesis borrows the CACR framework and applies it to Black towns in Oklahoma, arguing that founders of Huttonville and Vernon exercised this kind of quiet resistance—alongside their loud political resistance—through the establishment of independent municipalities that allowed them to control their economic, political, and social lives.

The work of scholars on Westward Black migration is also key to this work. Foundational to the field of Black migration studies is Nell Irvin Painter's *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction*.¹³ Although Painter's work examines the specific movement of the small Exodusters group that came out of the Mississippi River area, her analysis of push and pull factors has shaped studies of Black migration for the past 50 years. Quintard Taylor's decades of work on Black westward migration is also hugely important to the field of Black migration studies. Taylor's expansive work, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990*, pulled African Americans to the forefront

¹² Monica M. White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

¹³ Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 1976).

of the discussion of America's Westward expansion and shaped my own terminology when discussing African American migration and its complex relationship to settler colonialism.¹⁴

Building on the analysis of Painter, Taylor, and many others, Richard Edwards and Jacob K. Friefeld wrote *The First Migrants: Homesteading and the Great Migration*, which tells the story of Black homesteaders coming out of the South and into the West.¹⁵ Homesteading played a key role in bringing African Americans to Oklahoma; the promise of free land lured many out West. *The First Migrants* examines how the homesteading movement fits into larger stories of Black freedom and community. However, the book also makes the flawed argument that homesteaders, and moreover Black town founders, never intended for their farms to become multi-generational family spaces but rather hosted these farms and communities as transitional spaces for their children. These migrants did not advertise these spaces as transitional. Rather, they encouraged others to come and stay. The continued existence of these towns and the ongoing efforts by residents to maintain their communities showcase both their intended and actual longevity.

Scholars interested in Black towns have proposed several reasons for the interest in forming the towns. Some, like Kenneth Hamilton in *Black Towns and Profit*, argue that the motivation for founding Black towns was strictly economic. Others, like Hannibal Johnson in *Acres of Aspiration*, argue that the motivation for the founding of Black towns was more ideological. These reasons cannot be distinguished from one another. Within the motivation behind the founding of Black towns, economic, political, and social interests cannot be separated. Black town founders knew there was significant economic gain to be had if these

¹⁴ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

¹⁵ Richard Edwards and Jacob K. Friefeld, *The First Migrants: How Black Homesteaders' Quest for Land and Freedom Heralded America's Great Migration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

towns succeeded, but the appeal of that gain was rooted in its novelty and the inability of Black people to succeed in that way elsewhere. The Black town movement was, at its core, a Black nationalist movement, a point which is well understood by the scholars of the Black town movement. Further, the tenants of Black nationalism did not distinguish between the necessity of political, social, and economic liberation for total Black liberation and autonomy.

Histories of the Black community in Oklahoma such as Jimmie Franklin's *Journey Toward Hope* or Arthur Tolson's *The Black Oklahomans* tend to focus briefly on the differences between Afro-Indigenous people and African Americans before moving on.¹⁶ My thesis contributes to the historiography of Black Oklahomans by taking the time to thoroughly understand these differences, as well as acknowledging and analyzing the nuance of the African Creek experience. This thesis offers a new perspective on existing histories, one that emphasizes cultural hybridization and blending during times of high racial tension.

In addition to drawing upon historical scholarship, this thesis incorporates theoretical frameworks from the fields of sociology and cultural anthropology. Karla Slocum's book, *Black Towns, Black Futures: The Enduring Allure of a Black Place in the American West*, brings Black towns out of the past and into the present.¹⁷ Slocum, a cultural anthropologist, does important work in framing Black towns as something that extends out of history, studying them as active communities. She also argues that Black towns are a vehicle for understanding exceptional qualities of Black life and Black contributions to American history. I expand upon her analysis to understand the nuances of Black communities that contain people with multiple ethnic

¹⁶ Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); Arthur Lincoln Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans: A History, 1541-1972* (New Orleans: Edwards Printing Co., 1974).

¹⁷ Karla Slocum, *Black Towns, Black Futures: The Enduring Allure of a Black Place in the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 2019).

backgrounds. All too often, the Black experience is discussed monolithically, but the Black experience is not monolithic, and it never has been. By exploring Afro-Indigeneity and further, African Creek identity, I build upon the Afro-Indigenous historiography that challenges the instinct to lump Black experiences into one category. Further, I complicate the perception of Afro-Indigeneity as one cohesive experience, so that the nuances of the African Creek experience can be understood.

Language is not neutral; I strive to be cognizant of the ways in which labels have been used to belittle and ostracize the people whose stories I share in the following pages. Because of the tense and complicated nature of the stories I write, I have chosen my terms carefully and through consultation with other scholars and stakeholders. The following paragraphs delineate the reasons I have chosen the language I use and hopefully my writing in the following chapters will illustrate the significance of my careful language.

Muscogee (Creek) Nation

Creek is the European name given to the Nation by White settlers because the talwas, or towns, that made up the Nation were grouped along rivers in the Southeast region of the modern-day United States, the Nation's traditional homeland. Muscogee, spelled in the language as Mvskoke, is the name the Nation currently uses. Some enrolled members of the Nation still use the term "Creek" to describe themselves, and many African Creeks also identify as such. From the time of Removal in the 1830s to Oklahoma statehood in 1907, citizens of the Muscogee Nation describe themselves as Creek; however, unless I am directly quoting from a source, I use the term Muscogee because I want to be respectful of Muscogee culture and the language the Nation uses to represent itself. However, I still use the term African Creek to describe Muscogee people with African ancestry as a nod to the way African Creeks identified, then and now. In my

conversations with African Creek individuals, they have primarily used the term “Creek” to self-identify.¹⁸

African Creek and Non-Black Muscogee

Distinguishing between African Creeks and non-Black Muscogeese in large groups is particularly difficult. African Creeks were thoroughly enmeshed with larger Muscogee culture and rarely, if ever, self-identified as “Black,” or “African.” When using the term “African Creek,” I am denoting one or more of the following: identification with an African Creek talwa, or town, status as a freedperson, or identification as “colored” or “negro” within Dawes enrollment packets, censuses, or other documents prepared by state or federal agencies. I do not use the term “Black Creek” when discussing African Creeks historically because many did not claim Black identity until long after the period this thesis covers.¹⁹

I use the term non-Black Muscogeese when referring to Muscogee people without African heritage because I have found it is the most precise language. I use the term Muscogee rather than Creek in an effort to respect the Nation’s sovereignty and prioritize self-determined labels. Other scholars have used the term “Creek Indians” to refer to non-Black Muscogeese, but I feel that using that terminology (or any variation of that terminology, like Indigenous Muscogeese or “Red” Muscogeese) confirms a bias, held by many, that Black Indigenous peoples are not truly Indigenous (or “real Indians” as some have said). Implying that African Creeks are not truly Indigenous confirms the racist leanings of the “one-drop” rule and contradicts the way African Creeks themselves express their identity.

¹⁸ Caleb Gayle also identifies as and uses the term “Black Creek” in his monograph. Caleb Gayle, *We Refuse to Forget: A True Story of Black Creeks, American Identity, and Power*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2022).

¹⁹ This question of identity among African Creeks ultimately speaks to a larger question of Black identity, who claims it, and what it means. Some openly claimed Black identity and spoke of their African descent. Others rejected the terminology and the identity, seeking to avoid the weight of oppressive, racialized systems.

African American

My use of the term “African American” only refers to people of African descent who migrated West from the United States to the Oklahoma and Indian Territories and their descendants. I choose to be careful with this term because “American” denotes nationality. African Creeks were not American citizens when Oklahoma Territory was organized and African Americans began migrating to the area, they were citizens of the Muscogee Nation. This distinction is important because there were multiple sovereign nations in the Twin Territories from 1889 to 1907. After I begin discussing Oklahoma once it entered the Union, I continue to distinguish between African Americans and African Creeks to show how the two groups had distinct cultures that initially precluded communal ties based on racial solidarity.

Migrant and Emigrant

Following the tradition of many scholars of the Black West, I use the term “migrant” or “emigrant” rather than “settler” when referring to African Americans coming to Oklahoma out of the South because the term settler is politically charged and fails to acknowledge the nuance of Black migrant lives.²⁰ Tiya Miles writes about this issue, reminding us that Black people often lived in a state of exile and struggled to find spaces that were safe and welcoming.²¹ Miles’ work reminds us that there is not a fixed boundary between Native and settler, especially when Black people’s stories are considered. Still, I do not want to ignore the ways in which migrants perpetuated settler colonialism through their actions and rhetoric. Roberts examines the ways in

²⁰ Quintard Taylor uses this phrasing in his works on Black migration. Taylor’s work on migration includes: Donald A. Grinde and Quintard Taylor, “Red vs Black: Conflict and Accommodation in the Post Civil War Indian Territory, 1865-1907,” *American Indian Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1984): 211, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1183929>, Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier : African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990*, 1st ed.. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, eds, *African American Women Confront the West: 1600-2000*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

²¹ Tiya Miles, “Beyond a Boundary: Black Lives and the Settler-Native Divide,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2019): 417, <https://doi.org/10.5309/willmaryquar.76.3.0417>.

which non-white groups appropriated and weaponized settler colonial rhetoric to gain and maintain access to land in Oklahoma.²² I borrow her framework of settler colonialism as a rhetorical tool to analyze the rhetorical choices made by migrants. Most importantly, I am not attempting to pass judgement on or moralize the decisions of migrants, natives, or others. Rather the goal is to understand the context of the decisions made by these groups and their contingencies.

Chapter Map

This thesis is split into three chapters, divided thematically rather than chronologically. My first chapter examines how African Creek allottees collectively consolidated their land to found Huttonville in order to protect themselves from rising racial divisions in the Muscogee Nation as White settlers and the opening of Oklahoma Territory put increasing pressure upon it. The chapter follows the history of African-descended peoples in the Muscogee Nation, beginning in the sixteenth century and progressing to 1904. Huttonville is reflective of a larger movement of African Creeks who used community ties to protect their status as landowners and preserve their cultural heritage.

My second chapter jumps back in time to 1865 to explore African American migration to Oklahoma and the founding of Vernon. The chapter delineates the hopes and broken promises of landownership for African American freedpeople during Reconstruction in the American South, then moves West with them as they sought to fulfill these hopes elsewhere. This migration ultimately buttressed the United States' colonization of Indian Territory, but the average migrant was more concerned with personal uplift than the fight between Indigenous Nations in Indian

²² Alaina E Roberts, *I've Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

Territory and the U.S. The history of migration and town boosterism are explored through the story of Vernon's founders and prominent business owners. Boosters and migrants were key in bringing American, specifically African American, culture to Oklahoma, which led to cultural tensions between African Creeks and African Americans.

The third and final chapter explores the White settler panic surrounding Black "domination" in the state and the resulting sharp rise in legislative and physical violence against Black people in Oklahoma, indiscriminate of the cultural differences between African Creeks, Afro-Indigenous peoples at large, and African Americans. As a result, inter-cultural Black political and social alliances formed. The conclusion describes the active communities and the significance of their stories.

These stories help us understand how race and culture intersect in Oklahoma history and further, the role that towns played in forming and sustaining kinship networks during periods of turmoil. In order to fully appreciate the richness of Oklahoma history, we must consider the complexities and nuances within our cultural landscape.

Chapter 1

African Creeks and Changing Times in the Muskogee (Creek) Nation

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“By ignoring such matters as the sharing of bloodlines and cultural traditions by groups of wildly differing ethnic origins, and by overlooking the blending and metamorphosis of cultural forms which is so characteristic of our society, we misconceive our cultural identity.”

Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*

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In 1888, Joseph Hutton Sr. hosted his first “Holstein Picnic.” Named after the black and white cattle breed, the annual round up was open to anyone who wanted to attend, regardless of race, and featured fellowship, BBQ, and competitive sports.²³ Interested competitors could show off through feats of strength, hoss racing (horse racing), rifle shooting, calf and goat roping, bronc riding, and steer bulldogging.²⁴ The picnic tradition continued for another 50 years, carried on by Hutton’s grandchildren after his passing, and drew large crowds. In 1920, the picnic drew 600 people.²⁵ Hutton was an African Creek freedman who was born into slavery in the old “Upper Creek” Muscogee territory, moved with the Nation on The Road of Suffering, “Nene Estemerkv,” and settled in the Huttonville area with his wife and children after the Civil War.²⁶

Huttonville is one of more than 50 all-Black towns that dotted Oklahoma’s landscape from before the state’s founding to the present day. The town lies roughly 5 miles North of the Canadian River and 4 miles Northwest of Eufaula. Since its founding it was an exceptionally small town—numbering 121 families at its height in 1919—and scholars have consistently overlooked it in the historiography of Black towns.²⁷ So little is known about it that Hannibal

²³ Clarence L. Baccus, “The Great Joe Hutton,” self-published; T. Mikles and R. Venator, “Willy Nilly Goes to the Picnic,” *The O’Collegian* (Stillwater, OK), July 26, 1938.

²⁴ T. Mikles and R. Venator, “Willy Nilly Goes to the Picnic,” *The O’Collegian* (Stillwater, OK), July 26, 1938.

²⁵ “Odd Fellows Hold Big Picnic,” *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, OK), July 9, 1920.

²⁶ ‘Nene Estemerkv’ is the Mvskoke term for Removal, commonly known as the Trail of Tears. I use the Mvskoke term or its translation ‘The Road of Suffering,’ rather than The Trail of Tears partly because that is the term the Muscogee Nation uses and partly because ‘Trail of Tears’ is a term heavily associated with the Cherokee Nation, whom I am not discussing. Email conversation with Midge Dellinger, Oral Historian, Historic and Cultural Preservation Department, The Muscogee (Creek) Nation, March 18, 2025; Clarence L. Baccus, “The Great Joe Hutton,” self-published.

²⁷ “Notice-Doctor Wanted,” *The Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, OK), February 21, 1919.

Johnson's expansive work on Oklahoma's Black towns, *Acres of Aspiration* (2002), only includes three sentences on the supposed ghost town:

“Huttonville, located in McIntosh County, maintained a post office from 1896 to 1915. Originally named for its first postmaster, A. J. Hutton, the town changed its name to Nerotown in honor of a Creek allotment owner, Governor Nero. The town now lies beneath Lake Eufaula.”²⁸

Except Huttonville is not abandoned. Nor is it underwater. In fact, the community is still active, with a church that still hosts services and a cemetery that people still choose as their final resting place. Descendants of Joseph Hutton Sr. still live in the area. But the story of Joseph Hutton Sr. and his family, who collectively owned over 2,000 acres of land, has not been explored in the historiography of Black towns, the Muscogee Nation, or Afro-Indigenous peoples. Uncovering Huttonville's past allows us to see a rich, underexplored history of Black identity in Oklahoma, one that unsettles the concept of a standard Black culture and explores the ways that nationality and race intersected to shape the political, social, and economic lives of African Creeks in early Oklahoma history.

Although African Creeks had separate tribal towns in the Reconstruction period, these communities were not insular, nor necessarily formed because African Creeks were excluded from tribal life. However, as intruders began to flood into the Nation and the United States began to threaten its sovereignty, non-Black Muscogees enforced a new, more rigid racial hierarchy that excluded African Creeks from their Indigenous community. In response, many African Creeks, including the Huttons, formed separate communities to protect their political, social, and economic status as landowners and citizens. At first, these communities did not include African American migrants because of the large cultural divide between African Americans and African

²⁸ Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration*, 213.

Creeks. African Creeks expressed resentment for incoming Black migrants, believing that African Americans' deference to White settlers—an action rooted in self-preservation, if taken at all—caused White settlers to expect the same deference from African Creeks, thus relegating them to the status of Black Americans. African Creeks viewed themselves as separate from African Americans and were frustrated by White settlers' refusal to acknowledge the differences between their two groups.

Initial Contact to the Civil War

Muscogee (Creek) peoples began to incorporate African-descended peoples into their kinship networks in the 17th century. According to oral tradition, first contact between African-descended and Muscogee peoples occurred in the 16th century when Hernando de Soto traveled through the Southeast on his expedition.²⁹ Regular contact between Black and Muscogee peoples began later, as Britain expanded colonization into South Carolina and brought enslaved African people to the continent.³⁰ The Muscogee Nation had yet to adopt chattel slavery as a practice at the time of the Revolutionary War.³¹ Prior to the 1770s, Muscogee citizens had held slaves, but the system of slavery in the Nation more closely resembled West Africans systems of kinship slavery than the American system of chattel slavery.³² Typically, an enslaved person was a noncombatant war captive, often a woman or child, and could be of Indigenous or African descent, as slavery was not yet a racialized institution. Their status as a slave would not be inherited, and sometimes they were adopted into their enslaver's kinship network and fully

²⁹ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 3.

³⁰ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 7.

³¹ For a more in-depth discussion of Muscogee slavery practices, see Daniel F. Littlefield, *Africans and Creeks: From the Colonial Period to the Civil War*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979) and Gary Zellar, *African Creeks: Estelute and the Creek Nation*.

³² Zellar, *African Creeks*, 8-10.

incorporated into Muscogee society.³³ As contact between European colonizers and Muscogee people continued, slavery took on new forms, with the institution remaining “ambiguous and malleable” to fit the needs of individual enslavers and the nation as a whole.³⁴

By the 1770s, the Black enslaved population in the Southern portion of the British colonies bordering the Muscogee Nation had risen considerably; colonists who established farms on Muscogee land cessations depended on enslaved labor.³⁵ Muscogeese initially participated in the European slave trade through the capture and return of escaped enslaved people, but began taking enslaved people captive and holding them as slaves during the Revolutionary War. The number of Muscogeese holding slaves increased sharply during the war and continued to rise until forced removal in the 1830s. On Nene Estemerkv, enslaved people walked alongside Muscogeese, experiencing the same hardships. Eventually, their labor contributed to the rebuilding of the Nation between removal and the Civil War.

By the 1830s, the practice of slavery in the Muscogee Nation had evolved from its initial, pre-contact form. Most significantly the status of enslavement began to be inherited, so that entire families were subject to enslavement. These are the conditions Joseph Hutton was born into. Hutton was born to Jim “Chinny Chotke” and Venus Grayson, who were both enslaved by Robert Grierson (later Grayson). Robert Grierson treated Jim and Venus as fungible; he “transferred” Jim, Venus, and their children Sam, Reubin, Arnold, Will, Huton, Maryanna, and Abigail to his daughter Katy in 1817, but he separated Joseph from his parents and siblings by

³³ Kathryn E. Holland Braund, “The Creek Indians, Blacks, and Slavery,” *The Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 4 (1991): 602-604, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2210598>.

³⁴ Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 495.

³⁵ Holland Braund, “Creek Indians, Blacks, and Slavery,” 609.

“gifting” him to Nancy, another young Grayson.³⁶ Some Muscogee enslavers maintained a master-slave relationship wherein enslaved people were treated as legal property and kept in separate quarters for the express purpose of creating profit. Others maintained a more patron-client style relationship in which enslaved people cultivated land according to their own interests and contributed a portion of their produce to their enslaver; profit was only generated upon sale.³⁷ In the patron-client system, which was similar to the kinship system that existed pre-contact, enslaved people were sometimes adopted as full, free members of the Nation.³⁸ The difference between these choices seems to have been related to the enslaver’s heritage, rather than differences between the Upper and Lower Creeks. Those who had mixed-European heritage were more likely to take on the master-slave relationship, but those who did not tended to engage in the patron-client system.³⁹ Based on Hutton’s descriptions of life under enslavement and the choice of Grierson to split Joseph from his family, the Grierson family practiced the master-slave relationship, which makes sense, as Robert Grierson was a Scottish immigrant who married Sinogee, a Muscogee woman.⁴⁰ Some enslaved people had surprisingly positive relationships with their enslavers, even choosing to remain on the same land after the Muscogee National Council made slavery illegal following the Civil War. However, enslavement was never a positive status. After being separated from his parents, Joseph Hutton never again saw his father. Following the Civil War and his emancipation, Hutton went to find his father but learned he had died in 1863; they missed each other by one year.⁴¹ As Muscogee freedwoman Lizzie Jackson

³⁶ Nancy’s exact relationship to Robert is difficult to ascertain. Saunt describes her as “half sister to some of the Graysons,” but does not elaborate. Records of Nancy before her marriage to Jim Hutton and subsequent name change are difficult to find. Saunt, *Black, White, and Indian*, 46.

³⁷ Holland Braund, “Creek Indians, Blacks, and Slavery,” 625.

³⁸ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 15.

³⁹ Holland Braund, “Creek Indians, Blacks, and Slavery,” 631.

⁴⁰ Robert Grierson, *Scotland, Select Births and Baptisms, 1564-1950*, Salt Lake City, Utah: FamilySearch, 2013. Sinogee Grierson, Ancestry Person, Ancestry.com.

⁴¹ Baccus, “The Great Joseph Hutton.”

recalled in an interview with a WPA worker in 1938, “even if master was good, the slaves was bad off.”⁴²

Following the end of the Civil War in 1865, the United States government insisted on negotiating a new treaty with the Muscogee Nation, a punishment for their supposed betrayal during the war. The Nation never officially sided, as one political entity, with the Union or the Confederacy; however, there were bands who formed alliances and fought with both sides. Some African Creeks joined the First Indian, and other Union troops, and participated in battles throughout Indian Territory, including the Battle of Honey Springs.⁴³ The new treaty, adopted in 1866, required the nation to cede 3.25 million acres of their land in Indian Territory, gave right of way to railroads, and emancipate their enslaved population.⁴⁴ At this point, the “Loyal Party” of the Muscogee National Council had already passed an emancipation law and Loyal Muscogee negotiators insisted on including the provision in the treaty, over objections from “Southern Party,” or Confederate, Muscogees.⁴⁵ Emancipation included not only freedom, but also adoption into the Nation as full citizens. The treaty of 1866 stated that freedpeople and their descendants “shall have and enjoy all the rights and privileges of native citizens, including an equal interest in the soil and national funds.”⁴⁶ This meant that freedpeople were citizens and had the right to

⁴² T. Lindsay Baker and Julie P. Baker, eds., *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives*, Works Project Administration Slave Narratives (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 219.

⁴³ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 66-67.

⁴⁴ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 77-79. Alaina Roberts has argued that the U.S. government used the issue of emancipation and adoption as a tool to undermine Indigenous sovereignty and speed land dispossession. While this is an accurate assessment of the federal government’s intentions in the negotiation process, for the Loyal Party of the Muscogee Nation, the demand for freedmen’s rights was not a violation of their sovereignty. See Zellar, *African Creeks*, 276, n 8.

⁴⁵ The Loyal Party was born of the conservative Upper Creek group that dated to pre-removal Muscogee politics. Upper Creeks strongly disavowed voluntary removal and assimilation. The Southern Party was born of the Lower Creek faction that included more White-mixed Muscogees and were more willing to acquiesce to White settlers’ demands. Zellar, *African Creeks*, 77-80.

⁴⁶ This provision was willingly included by Loyal Creek negotiators, over the objections of the Confederate Party and even some of the federal government’s treaty commissioners. Zellar, *African Creeks*, 276; “Treaty with the Creeks,” June 14, 1866, 14 Stats., 785 (ratified July 19, 1866, proclaimed Aug. 11, 1866).

<https://treaties.okstate.edu/treaties/treaty-with-the-creeks-1866-0931>.

cultivate land and collect annuity payments, though only men had the right to vote and hold office.⁴⁷ With these newfound freedoms, they became active participants in the social, political, and economic life of the Nation. They enrolled their children in public schools, participated in social and cultural activities, voted, collected annuity, and cultivated land, accessing the famed forty acres and a mule that freedmen in America never received. Contrary to freedpeople's experiences in the American South, where African Americans briefly enjoyed citizenship rights during Reconstruction before being subjected to Jim Crow measures and "Black Codes," the majority of Muscogee freedpeople retained their citizenship rights throughout the tribal period. Former Confederate Muscogee politicians repeatedly made efforts to disenfranchise African Creeks and other political enemies within the boundaries of the Muscogee Nation in Indian Territory, but these efforts tended to only affect individuals, rather than the entire African Creek population.⁴⁸

Reconstruction and the Formation of African Creek Towns

During the Reconstruction period, three African Creek towns emerged as African Creeks returned to the Muscogee Nation. During the Civil War, many Muscogees left the Nation due to the violent upheaval taking place. Union sympathizers tended to flee north, to Kansas, while Confederate sympathizers and slaveholders went south into the Choctaw and Chickasaw lands and Texas. Many African Creeks were forced to find their way home without aid and did so slowly over the next few years.⁴⁹ As they returned, some African Creeks returned to the land

⁴⁷ Perryman, L. C., ed. *Constitution and Laws of the Muskogee Nation*. 1890. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1975, page 3.

⁴⁸ The political contention that characterized the 1860s-1890s is incredibly difficult to distill into a few short sentences. For a more expansive discussion of the political landscape of the Muscogee Nation in this period and how African Creeks were impacted by it, see Gary Zellar's *African Creeks* and David Chang, *Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 51-52, 96.

they had lived on before the war and others found new places in the Nation to live. The towns—Canadian Colored, North Fork Colored, and Arkansas Colored—that emerged during this period of resettlement served a different function than towns in American society.

Huttonville was part of a town, or “talwa,” which, in Muscogee culture, described a body of people living in a number of settlements with one central settlement that contained a “square ground complex,” or town square, and served both administrative and cultural functions.⁵⁰ In this way, talwas were similar to American counties, with the central settlement serving a similar function to a county seat.⁵¹ The settlement hosted court and voting and the square ground was used for cultural events like the poskita ceremony, a multi-day celebration of the ripening of corn in the fall.⁵² Male citizens voted in the settlement to elect “Miccos,” in English, “town kings,” to represent their talwas in the House of Kings, a branch of the National Council that formed in 1867 when the Muscogee Nation adopted a new constitution and three-branch form of government. Besides representing their town in the National Council, Miccos kept their talwa’s membership rolls.⁵³

This structure was adapted to fit the needs of the new three-branch government structure the Muscogee Nation adopted in 1867, but its roots are found in pre-contact Muscogee culture. Until Removal, the Muscogee Nation did not have one central governing body. Rather, the

⁵⁰ Sigmund Sameth, “Creek Negroes: A Study of Race Relations” (MA Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1940), 32-33.

⁵¹ Siegal McIntosh, a Creek freedman, made this comparison in his 1937 interview with WPA field worker Grace Kelley. Interview with Siegal E. McIntosh, Indian Pioneer Papers, WHC.
https://repository.ou.edu/islandora/object/oku%3A9331?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=45b2df1e53bd24a833d5&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=0&search=%2522siegal%2522

⁵² The poskita (sometimes called busk or Green Corn) ceremony included solemn rituals meant to purify and renew the world. Many southeastern Indigenous groups have practiced, and continue to practice, some version of this ritual. Robbie Franklyn Ethridge, *Creek Country: The Creek Indians and Their World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 147.

⁵³ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 98.

“Creek Confederacy,” as it has been called, was a series of inter-talwa alliances. Talwas were still groups of settlements with a central complex, but Miccos were not members of a central body of representatives. Rather, they independently formed alliances with other talwas as suited their needs. This grouping of talwa alliances, sharing a similar language and culture, eventually consolidated into two groups: the Upper and Lower Creeks, each led by a chief.⁵⁴ In 1840, after arriving and settling in Indian Territory, the Nation formed a General Council, presided over by the two chiefs.⁵⁵ However, association with a talwa within the Upper and Lower groups superseded national identity until the Civil War.

The three African Creek talwas—Canadian Colored, North Fork Colored, and Arkansas Colored known in Mvskoke as Kvnete Lvslatv, Oktah’ Hvtee Lvslatv, and Akensa Lvslatv respectively—differed from the 11 traditional Muscogee talwas because they lacked a square ground for ceremonial events.⁵⁶ It is unclear why these talwas lacked a square ground, but Zellar has posited that African Creeks likely participated in events such as the poskita ceremony in traditional talwas.⁵⁷ The African talwas, then, functioned as electoral districts that concentrated Black Creek voting power to protect their interests. However, the talwas were more than simply administrative units. As in pre-removal culture, identification with a town was a marker of kinship. Although the talwas corresponded with settlement areas, one could still identify with a town, even if they no longer lived in the area. By identifying their talwa, a Muscogee person

⁵⁴ Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes*, (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1938), 153.

⁵⁵ David A Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929*, 1st edition. (Chapel Hill: Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 26.

⁵⁶ Angela Walton-Raji, “Freedmen Settlements of Indian Territory and Three Freedmen Community Clusters,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (Summer 2023), 254.

⁵⁷ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 97.

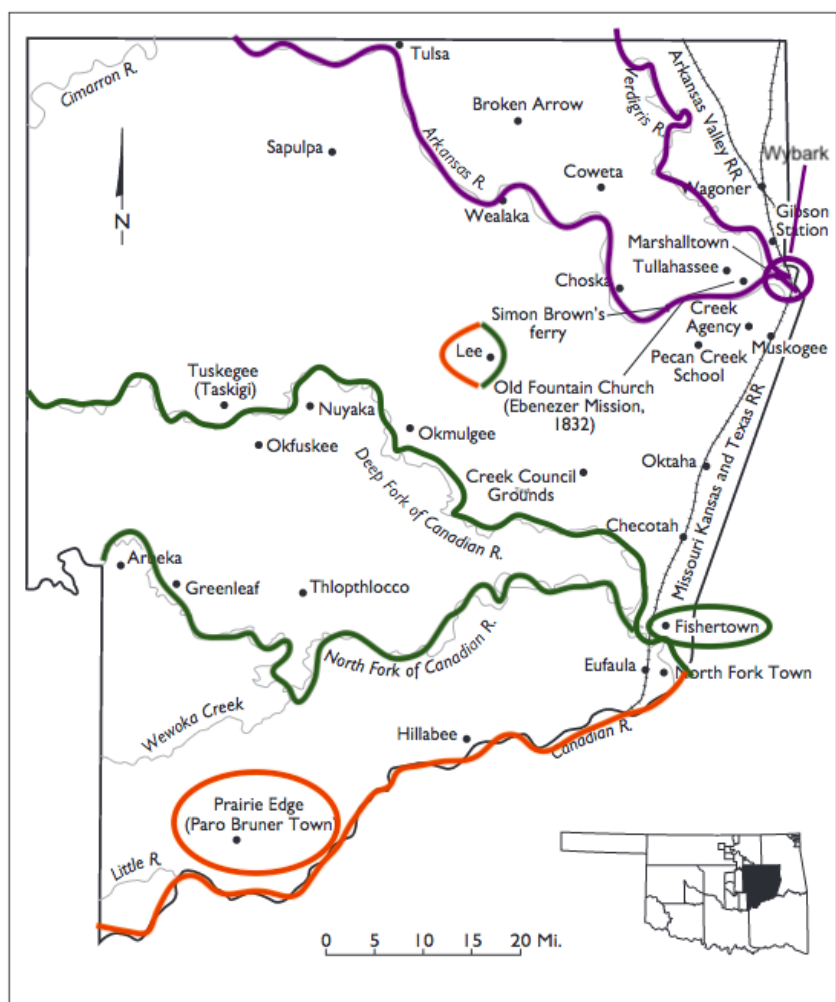
identified who their family was, thus demonstrating their right to claim Muscogee citizenship and further, identity.

Although they lacked a square ground, each of the African Creek talwas had a settlement where residents voted and collected annuity payments. Arkansas Colored corresponded to settlements in the Arkansas-Verdigris River valley and did not have an official settlement center, but the largest concentration of African Creeks lay in the settlement of Wybark, north of Muscogee (see Figure 1).⁵⁸ North Fork Colored included people who lived in settlements both on the North Fork and north and west of the Deep Fork of the Canadian River; its center was originally at Fishertown (near present day Eufaula) and later moved to Lee. Canadian Colored's geographic constraints were fairly scattered. Some settlements were along the Canadian River, but others overlapped with North Fork settlements; its headquarters were first at Wellington (also known as Lee) and moved to Prairie Edge (near present day Holdenville).⁵⁹ Joseph Hutton and his family were a part of the Canadian talwa, but some Huttonville residents were from North Fork.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Sameth, "Creek Negroes," 33; Zellar, *African Creeks*, 98.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ James Hutton, Creek Nation, Dawes Commission Enrollment Records, Roll Number 1104, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1186.; In Alice Hunter's Dawes application, her family's post office is listed as Huttonville, but her town affiliation is North Fork Colored. Dawes Enrollment Jacket for Creek, Creek Freedmen Newborn, Card #560, NARA, RG 75. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/45195926?objectPage=4>



Creek country, 1866–1907.

Figure 1. The Muscogee Nation. Map drawn by Bill Nelson. Annotations by Elizabeth Thomas.⁶¹

As “Creek Country” became part of the Union and tribal sovereignty in the Muscogee Nation was overturned, the practical uses for talwas faded, and the towns became a way to rhetorically claim citizenship as Muscogee. Many people, during the late 1890s and early 1900s, would describe themselves as being from two places: their talwa and their “American” town, as

⁶¹ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 83.

designated by the post office where they received their mail. For example, a Huttonville resident, Maria Tobler, described herself as being both from Huttonville and Thlewahle.⁶²

Changing Times: The Dawes Commission

In 1887, the 49th U.S. Congress passed the General Allotment Act, colloquially known as the Dawes Act. The federal government designed this piece of legislation to force Indigenous groups to stop holding their land in common and instead accept individual parcels of land, called allotments.⁶³ The law did not apply to Indian Territory because the Five Tribes lobbied Congress to prevent their inclusion in the act. However, in 1893, Congress established the Dawes Commission to begin negotiations with the Five Tribes with the end goal of persuading the sovereign nations to accept allotment and the dissolution of their governments.⁶⁴ In 1898, Congress passed the Curtis Act, which abolished tribal courts, placed Indian Territory under the jurisdiction of the federal court system, and gave the Dawes Commission authority to prepare a set of citizenship rolls for the tribes in Indian Territory.⁶⁵

In establishing citizenship rolls, the commission members followed the Anglo-American legal precedent of racial hypodescent, also known as the “one drop rule.”⁶⁶ In this framework, Americans established a racial hierarchy—with Whiteness at the top, Indigeneity beneath, and Blackness at the bottom. A mixed person would be assigned to the lowest of the relevant categories. Therefore, a person of White and Muscogee heritage was Muscogee, but a person of

⁶² Dawes Enrollment Jacket for Creek, Creek Minor, Card #44, Applications for Enrollment of the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898-1914, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1301.

⁶³ M. Kaye Tatro, “Curtis Act (1898),” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CU006>.

⁶⁴ Kent Carter, “Snakes & Scribes: The Dawes Commission and the Enrollment of the Creeks 1893-1914,” *Prologue* 29, no. 1 (1997). <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/spring/dawes-commission-1.html>

⁶⁵ M. Kaye Tatro, “Curtis Act (1898),” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CU006>.

⁶⁶ Chang, *Color of the Land*, 94.

Muscogee and African heritage was Black. A person who had all three, as was common for African Creeks, was also Black.⁶⁷ In trying to create separate racial categories, commissioners created two rolls of citizens: “by-blood” and “freedmen.”

The Commissioners’ work of dividing Muscogee citizens into “by-bloods” and “freedmen” was haphazard and actively facilitated Black Creek dispossession. Wallace Tobler, a Huttonville resident, was split from his siblings during enrollment. Despite being full siblings, Tobler was enrolled on the freedmen rolls while his brother and two sisters were placed on the by-blood rolls. Why, exactly, the commission chose to split this family onto two rolls is unclear. Wallace did apply for citizenship in 1900, one year before his siblings. Perhaps in that year the commission simply changed their mind about whether having a Black father disqualified the Toblers from recognition of their Muscogee heritage. Given the high level of discretion afforded to commissioners by the Dawes Commission, this discrepancy between Wallace and his siblings was likely due to commissioners’ individual decision-making. Regardless, this incident left landowners vulnerable to dispossession, as the trust period on Wallace’s land was lifted in 1904, while his siblings’ land continued to be protected by trust laws.

Theirs was not an isolated incident. Although many African Creeks had non-Black Muscogee heritage, being of African descent relegated them to the freedmen rolls, where they were presumed to have no Indigenous blood. By distinguishing African Creeks from “by-blood” citizens, the Dawes Commission essentially declared that African Creeks were not “real

⁶⁷ The Dawes Commission sought to be even more precise in their ascription of “Indian” blood. Each applicant not claiming to be a “full blood” was questioned extensively about their heritage and Commissioners would assign a fraction, known as a blood quantum, to describe the amount of Creek “blood” they possessed. See David Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010) and Katherine Ellinghaus, *Blood Will Tell: Native Americans and Assimilation Policy*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

Indians,” casting doubt on their right to partake in the Muscogee estate at all. This not only undermined the Muscogee identity of African Creeks, but it also sped African Creek dispossession. Through the racialized policies of “competency,” Congress released people without “Indian blood” from the trust period that prevented them from selling their land in 1904. This left every African Creek who had been enrolled as a freedperson vulnerable to land speculators’ scams.⁶⁸

Dawes commissioners were not the only ones imposing a racial hierarchy and excluding African Creeks. Exclusion came from within the Nation as well. Although the Muscogee Nation clearly recognized racial difference enough to implement the institution of slavery, both African and non-African Creeks repeatedly established that kinship ties superseded racial difference in intranational relationships. Following Removal, the Creek National Council adopted a written code of laws in 1840 that included a ban on interracial marriage, but these laws were rarely enforced.⁶⁹ Racial fluidity characterized the Muscogee Nation for well over a century. The pressure intruders put on the Nation made the boundaries of race more rigid. The Nation, and its citizens, began to implement a racial hierarchy that prioritized blood over kinship and African Creeks began to withdraw and form their own communities, like Huttonville.

Newcomers: The Opening of the Territory

In 1889, President Benjamin Harrison declared the “Unassigned Lands,” the land ceded by the Muscogee and Seminole Nations in the post-Civil War treaties, open for settlement. Following this declaration, a number of “land runs” took place, allowing settlers to literally stake

⁶⁸ Ellinghaus, *Blood Will Tell*, 40.

⁶⁹ Daniel Littlefield, *Africans and Creeks*, 142; Zellar, *African Creeks*, 33.

their claim to the land.⁷⁰ The opening of the lands for settlement followed the ten year “boomer movement,” led by White settlers who gathered in border towns in Kansas, clamoring for “unused” lands to be opened.⁷¹ But White Americans were not alone in their desire for land. People all over the nation began to view “Beautiful Indian Territory,” as it was called, as a veritable Eden, a place where anyone could turn a chunk of land into a fortune.

However, landownership in Indian Territory meant more than profit to African Americans who viewed it as essential to the fulfilment of Reconstruction promises from the federal government. African Americans from the South widely believed that conditions for freedpeople in Indian Territory, specifically the Muscogee Nation, were not only better than in the South, but open to American freedmen. Some American freedmen misunderstood the treaties between the Five Tribes and the US, believing that they were entitled to citizenship in Indian Territory. A group called the “Freedmen’s Oklahoma Association” formed in St. Louis and Chicago in 1881 “to colonize thousands of Black freedmen in Oklahoma Territory.”⁷² An article in *The Rock Island Argus* specifically cited the Creek and Seminole treaties as the basis for the organization’s belief that they had a right to Indian Territory. The Honorable J. Milton Turner, an attorney that had represented Cherokee freedpeople in their bid to be included in the distribution of Congressional funds to the Cherokee Nation given in exchange for ceded lands, insisted that lands ceded by the Five Tribes were meant for American freedpeople to settle upon.⁷³ Turner

⁷⁰ Stan Hoig, “Land Run of 1889,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=LA014>.

⁷¹ Murray Wicket, *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865-1907*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 200), 46-48.

⁷² Johnson, *Acre of Aspiration*, 28.

⁷³ “Freedmen and Oklahoma: Their Right to Settle in Indian Territory,” *The New York Age*, April 14, 1888, <https://lccn.loc.gov/sn83030005>; Gary R. Kremer, “For Justice and a Fee: James Milton Turner and the Cherokee Freedmen,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1980-1981): 376-391 <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2031379/>.

circulated a flyer titled “To the freedmen of the United States” throughout the South, telling African Americans that through treaties signed with the “Creek, Seminole, and Chickasaw,” 14,000 acres of land had been set aside to be settled upon by freedmen, up to 160 acres per settler.⁷⁴ Turner and other advocates for American freedpeople’s settlement of Indian Territory seem to have made no distinction between settling on ceded land and settling within the borders of these sovereign Nations and thus created an environment of confusion in which African Americans arrived in Indian Territory expecting to settle on lands the United States had no claim to.

Indian Territory was not only Eden, it was Canaan. African Americans likened themselves to Israelites fleeing Egypt as they sought to escape the oppressive, violent conditions of life in the American South. After moving from Tennessee to Oklahoma City, African American migrant Edna Randolph Slaughter described her thoughts on Oklahoma: “I began to think about Moses and the people going to the promised land. Then I began to look on [Oklahoma] as the promised land.”⁷⁵

Although African Americans could not access Indian Territory, they could access Oklahoma Territory and become landowners. Homesteading was the primary means by which the federal land holdings in Oklahoma Territory, organized in 1890, were converted to privately owned land. Under the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862, any head of household over the age of 21 could claim up to 160 acres of land for only the cost of the filing fee so long as they lived on the land for five years and made some improvements.⁷⁶ The Act did not include any

⁷⁴ “Warning to the Colored People,” *The Morehouse Clarion* (Bastrop, La.), May 6, 1881.

⁷⁵ Kaye M. Teall, *Black History in Oklahoma. A Resource Book* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Public Schools, 1971), 164.

⁷⁶ Richard Edwards and Jacob K. Friefeld, *The First Migrants: How Black Homesteaders' Quest for Land and Freedom Heralded America's Great Migration*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 135.

mention of race. It did require the claimant to be, or declare their intention to be, a United States citizen, which did not apply to many African Americans prior to the Civil War. However, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the ratification of the 14th Amendment, African Americans could claim citizenship and homesteading became available to Black people.⁷⁷

In the early 1890s, Americans flooded the area, including African Americans seeking freedom from the oppressive South. Incoming Black migrants viewed landownership as the key to full citizenship, which they had been denied. They also viewed Afro-Indigenous people in Indian Territory as kin, believing that the shared experiences of slavery and racism could unite them as African-descended people, regardless of ethnicity. In an 1892 article printed in the *Afro-American Advocate*, a Kansas based paper that published stories “in the interest of the Negro race of Southeast Kansas, and the Freedmen of the five civilized tribes of the Indian Territory,” the writer lauded the opportunities available to Indigenous freedpeople in Indian Territory: “The opportunities of *our* people in that country far surpassed any of the kind possessed by our people in the U.S.”⁷⁸

However, contrary to what they expected, African Creeks did not perceive African Americans as kin. The large number of intruders openly derided Indigenous sovereignty, pushing non-Black Muscogees to tighten racial boundaries. Non-Black Muscogees believed that African Americans were entering Muscogee territory and passing themselves off as African Creeks. Fueling this belief were allegations that miccos of African Creeks towns were padding citizenship rolls with African Americans, taking bribes in exchange for fabricating Muscogee

⁷⁷ Edwards and Friefeld, *The First Migrants*, 38-40.

⁷⁸ *Afro-American advocate*. (Coffeyville, KS), Feb. 19, 1892. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn85031378/1892-02-19/ed-1/>. Emphasis my own.

identity for African Americans. By allegedly doing this, miccos not only lined their pockets, but also more representation for their towns in the House of Warriors, which hosted 1 representative for each town, plus an additional representative for every 200 citizens on the rolls.⁷⁹ It is not really possible to know the veracity of these claims, but the paranoia brought on by them hurt African Creeks all the same.

Non-Black Muscogees began to fret over the so-called “Negro question.” Around this time, non-Black individuals in the Muscogee Nation and beyond used the phrase “the Negro question” to refer to the conflict that arose between anti-Black racists seeking racialized exclusion and Black people seeking to be equal participants in their own societies. Non-Black Muscogees opened a number of discussions in newspapers and the National Council that encouraged Muscogees to be hesitant to accept African-descended peoples’ presence in their kinship networks.⁸⁰ An excerpt from a contract signed in 1890 by members of the Muscogee Nation shows how non-Black Muscogees were beginning to reject African Creeks’ claims to Indigenous identity. The contract appointed four men to be representative of Loyal Creek interests before the U.S. government and contradicted an earlier appointment made by a different group of Muscogee citizens, whom this contract claimed, “were colored and hence not representative of the *real* Loyal Indian element of the nation.”⁸¹ Although the original group were all citizens of the Nation, their ability to represent the desires of the Nation’s citizens, and further their identity as “Indians” at all, was called into question because of their African ancestry.

⁷⁹ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 196-197.

⁸⁰ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 191.

⁸¹ Creek delegation documents, Grayson Family Papers, WHC. Emphasis my own.

The rising anti-blackness in the Nation had steeper consequences than picking political representatives, however. Between 1898 and 1907, as the Dawes Commission worked through enrollment applications, they consistently turned back to citizenship decisions made by the Nation's citizenship board and National Council during these times of heightening racial tensions. When Joseph Hutton approached the Commission in 1901 to be enrolled, he began a three-year process in which his claims to citizenship would be thoroughly tested. The application process first required applicants to present their testimony to the Commission. Commissioners would ask about their age, their talwa, whether they left the Nation for an extended period of time, and any number of other questions they had.

Commissioners then consulted multiple existing citizenship rolls including the 1867 Dunn rolls (prepared by J.W. Dunn, an agent from the BIA), 1890 rolls, and 1895 rolls (both prepared by the Creek National Council).⁸² If the person was found on one of the myriad rolls, they were admitted and given a citizenship certificate. The trouble with Hutton was that he ostensibly had two last names: Grayson and Hutton. This is because the woman who enslaved him, Nancy, had the surname Grayson before she married Jim Hutton and took his name.⁸³ Joseph at times claimed both names, Grayson and Hutton, frustrating and confusing Commissioners as they attempted to verify his place on the rolls. As they examined his connections to the Nation, Commissioners called several witnesses, including Dick Grayson,

⁸² Zellar, *African Creeks*, 96; Carter, "Snakes and Scribes"; If the applicant was not found on one of these rolls, the Commission consulted a number of "Omitted" and supplemental rolls and called other community members to testify as to the veracity of the applicant's claim. For more on the chaotic nature of the process of selecting the rolls to be used, see Kent Carters "Snakes and Scribes," Gary Zellars *African Creeks*, and Katherine Ellinghaus' *Blood Will Tell*.

⁸³ Saunt, *Black, White, and Indian*, 46-47.

who was enslaved with Joseph's parents, Sam Grayson, Katy Grayson's grandson, Paro Bruno, a prominent African Creek politician, and Roly McIntosh, a prominent Muscogee politician.⁸⁴

When the Commissioners asked Joseph Hutton if he had ever made an application to citizenship in the Nation, he replied that he had not realized he needed to: "When I came back to this country I was under the impression that it was my own country, and had no idea that question would ever be raised as to my citizenship."⁸⁵ To Joseph Hutton, the question of his citizenship was not a question at all. He was born to Jim "Chinny Chotke" Grayson, who he described as "half Indian and half colored."⁸⁶ He was taken from his parents at a young age but moved with Nancy to Indian Territory. When the Civil War ended, he returned to the Creek Nation after being taken out of it by Nancy and her husband. His life may have occasionally taken him out of the Nation, but he always returned because that was his home. However, since he had two last names and struggled to recall some of the details of his life due to his age, the Commission vacillated over their decision. They closed and reopened his case twice before finally admitting him and giving him a citizenship certificate.⁸⁷ After receiving their certificate, applicants went to another office to select their allotments of land.⁸⁸ For the Muscogee Nation, each citizen received a total of 160 acres, comprised of a "homestead" (40 acres) and "surplus land" (120 acres). Homestead land was inalienable for 21 years, but the period of restrictions for sale and leasing of surplus land was considerably shorter, only 5 years.⁸⁹ The implicit goal of

⁸⁴ Dawes Enrollment Jacket for Creek, Creek Enrollment Cases, Card #92, applications for Enrollment of the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898-1914, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1301.

⁸⁵ Dawes Enrollment Jacket for Creek, Creek Enrollment Cases, Card #92, Applications for Enrollment of the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898-1914, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1301.

⁸⁶ Testimony of Joe Grayson, Sr., Letters and Documents Relating to Citizenship in the Creek Nation, 1874-1895, Creek Citizenship, doc. 25415, frame 514, CRN 3, OHS.

⁸⁷ Dawes Enrollment Jacket for Creek, Creek Enrollment Cases, Card #92, Applications for Enrollment of the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898-1914, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1301.

⁸⁸ Carter, "Snakes and Scribes."

⁸⁹ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 229.

dividing allotments into homestead and surplus lands was to see “surplus land” sold to non-Muscogee individuals and further diminish Indigenous land holdings.⁹⁰ Commissioners aiding allottees in making their land selections encouraged them to select their two pieces of land apart from each other, sometimes by miles, to make it more difficult for allottees to consolidate their land into one farm.⁹¹ Separate land sections were not required and many people either ignored the suggestion to claim separate land altogether or only allowed their land to be separated by their family members’ allotments. For example, Pilot Hutton, one of Joseph’s great-grandsons, received two separate forty-acre plots in section 24 of township 10 North range 15 East that sat on either side of his uncle Alex’s plot (see figure 2). His allotment was further surrounded by his uncle James Jr., great-grandmother Amelia, cousin Tooka, great-aunt Louisa, and great-uncle Dave.⁹² Pilot was only ten months old when he was enrolled by his father, Everett, who made the land selection for him.⁹³ Everett’s own allotment lay roughly 1.5 miles East of Pilot’s, but the space between himself and his son was occupied by family.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 211.

⁹¹ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 222.

⁹² *Hastain’s township plats of the Creek Nation*, township 10 North range 15 East.

⁹³ Oklahoma and Indian Territory, U.S., Land Allotment Jackets for Five Civilized Tribes, 1884-1934, accessed via Ancestry.com

⁹⁴ *Hastain’s township plats of the Creek Nation*, township 10 North range 16 East.

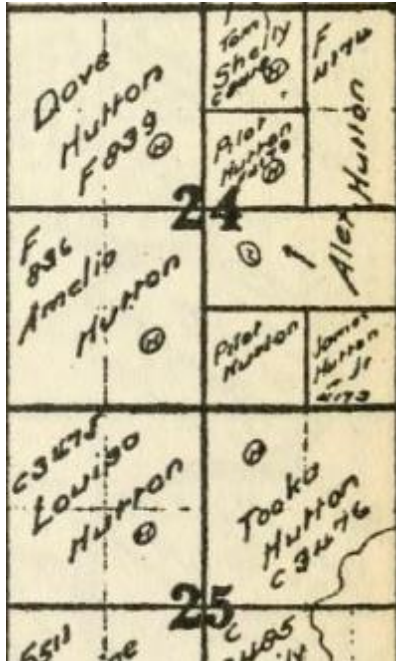


Figure 2. Township 10 North range 15 East, sections 24-25.

The Huttons, split into multiple branches at this point, as Joseph had two wives, fifteen children, as well as many grandchildren and great-grandchildren, selected land throughout the Nation, contiguous with the areas they had lived in before allotment began. James Hutton, Joseph's son, chose allotments surrounded by his wife, their children, their grandchildren, and some of his nieces and nephews.⁹⁵ They made their selections between 1898 and 1900, cementing their claim to the town they founded.

During the late 19th century, a town gained federal recognition one of two ways: after the construction of a post office or through the presentation of a petition for incorporation by town citizens at a federal court.⁹⁶ Huttonville's post office was established in 1896, with Alex Jasper Hutton, Joseph's grandson, as the first postmaster. By 1904, there was a school and a general

⁹⁵ *Hastain's Plat Maps of the Creek Nation*, 1910, Township 10 North 15 East and 10 North 16 East.

⁹⁶ Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration*, 78.

store, but not a town site.⁹⁷ This meant that residents were either allottees or their tenants. A townsite would allow Huttonville to open itself to development by non-allottees. On April 4, 1904, Walter Hutton wrote a letter to J. Geo Wright, the BIA's "Indian Inspector" for Indian Territory.⁹⁸ Hutton wanted to see the sale restrictions lifted on his allotment in order to have the land platted into a town site. "We have a store and a P.O. [and] a 9 mo. school. We wants [*sic*] a town and I am willing to sell my allotment... for same."⁹⁹

The "Commissioner in Charge" (who signed no name) wrote back eight days later, informing Hutton that the Commission did not have the authority to lift restrictions for Hutton to sell his land because the area he wanted to see platted for a townsite was not on the path of an existing railroad.¹⁰⁰ Though the land was never platted for a townsite, the town attracted residents, mostly African Creeks, who sent their children to the local school, used the post office, and attended the New Hope Baptist church.

Though some African American migrants resided in the town, including Oliver T. Willis—a preacher from Arkansas who became the postmaster in 1903—the town was mostly home to African Creeks. This was likely due in part to the other, larger towns that were drawing African American migrants, including Langston and Boley, but it was also certainly due to the cultural divide between African Creeks and African Americans.

African Creeks had a term they used to identify African Americans and explain their differences: "watchina." "Watchina" in Mvskoke meant "White man," but when used by African

⁹⁷ Letter from Walter Hutton to J. Geo. Wright April 4, 1904, Dawes Commission Records, American Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society.

⁹⁸ Grant Foreman, "J. George Wright: 1860-1941," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (Summer 1942) <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2192226/>

⁹⁹ Letter from Walter Hutton to J. Geo. Wright April 4, 1904, Dawes Commission Records, American Indian Archives, OHS.

¹⁰⁰ Letter from "Commissioner in Charge" to Walter Hutton, April 12, 1904, Dawes Commission Records, American Indian Archives, OHS.

Creeks, the term referred to African Americans derogatorily. Sigmund Sameth, an anthropologist, explains that the use of this term stemmed from the belief that African Americans were “White man’s negro[es]” and was slang for “itsi hugi imisti” meaning “a White man, his man (slave).”¹⁰¹ By using the term “watchina” to describe African Americans, African Creeks made it clear that they did not view their experiences as similar, despite the existence of slavery and anti-Black racism in the Muscogee Nation.

As statehood approached, many African Creeks viewed African Americans as the reason for their declining status. In an interview with Sameth in 1930, an African Creek explained their frustration:

“State People come into the country before statehood, pulling they hats off and kneeling and scurrying down to the white folks. They ruined the country and made a lot of natives [African Creeks] leave for the North. Natives won’t go to the back door if they has to see a white man. They won’t go at all rather than that. If the Southern Negro didn’t Uncle Tom so much they never would have drawn the line between the races.”¹⁰²

It is important to note that African Creeks did not reserve their ire for African Americans alone; White settlers were also a problem in the eyes of African Creeks. After all, it was White settlers who arrived with the expectation that they would be treated as superiors. What frustrated African Creeks was the lack of distinction drawn between themselves and African Americans. They did not see African Americans as kin, nor did they see the value in “mixing” with them. Another African Creek told Sameth: “I was eating out of the same pot with the Indians, going anywhere in this country I wanted to, while they were still licking their master’s boots in Texas.”¹⁰³ African Creeks believed that there was a stark distinction between their own experiences with slavery in the Muscogee Nation and African Americans’ experience with slavery. African Creeks also

¹⁰¹ Sameth, “Creek Negroes,” 53

¹⁰² Sameth, “Creek Negroes,” 56.

¹⁰³ Sameth, “Creek Negroes,” 56.

recognized other cultural differences, their traditions of communal land ownership, their language, and their religious beliefs and practices. Because of this, they did not claim Black identity until it was politically expedient to do so.

As African Americans began to migrate to the area, African Creeks were unwilling to bridge the cultural gap between their groups. However, as racial vitriol rose in the Twin Territories—Oklahoma and Indian Territories—African Creeks began to see the benefits of allying with African Americans to find safety, as well as political and economic independence. The concept of a “Black” identity, which had been pushed on them against their will, and racial solidarity, became more alluring. For African Americans, Black identity was more easily accepted. In forming all-Black towns, boosters and migrants employed tenets of Black nationalism, Black agrarianism, and collective autonomy and community resilience.

Chapter 2

West to Freedom: How African Americans Used Movement and Town Promotion Find Safety Amidst Persecution

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“As slaves they knew that to escape across the Mason-Dixon line northward was to move in the direction of a greater freedom. But freedom was also to be found in the West of the Old Indian Territory.”

Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*
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In 1899, the Fort Smith and Western Railroad Company began laying track west from Ft. Smith, Arkansas, toward Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory, for a new line that would change the lives of many Black Oklahomans.¹⁰⁴ With the new line came a flood of land speculators and townsite developers. Newcomers turned an appraising eye toward the land as the railroad offered a chance to extract profit from the town and its surrounding area by exporting its natural resources and spurred further development. Along with this new line were the sites of two towns soon to join the long list of all-Black communities in Oklahoma: Boley and Vernon. These towns shared something in common besides their racial demographics, a developer. Thomas M. Haynes, initially hired by two white businessmen to turn 80 acres of land in the Muscogee Nation into the town of Boley, also turned 160 acres of ranchland in McIntosh County, also part of the Muscogee Nation, into an active farm town named Vernon.

The first chapter shows how Huttonville can be seen as a microcosm of African Creek culture and history, particularly how the town upheld Muscogee traditions of collective landownership through the maintenance of strong kinship ties. This chapter will examine Vernon as a lens for understanding African Americans in Oklahoma’s history and how African Creek and African American cultural practices contrasted with each other. Vernon, established on

¹⁰⁴ Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1979), 35-36.

purchased land, rather than allotments, and after Oklahoma statehood, rather than before, more vigorously sought out economic development and population growth than did Huttonville. Huttonville established only one business, a general store, and was never platted as a townsite. In contrast, Thomas Hayne's promotion of Vernon drew a number of entrepreneurs, including R. H. Lesley, who opened a cafe, R. W. Whitaker, who opened one of Vernon's multiple grocery stores, and S. B. Dozier, who built a sawmill, grist mill, and cotton gin.¹⁰⁵ In 1912, only one year after its incorporation, the town had 150 residents.¹⁰⁶ In 1950, this number had risen to 600.¹⁰⁷ These features distinguish the two towns, not only in form, but also in function. Huttonville was built as a shelter for African Creeks already residing in the area, to protect an extant community. In founding Vernon, Haynes sought to draw people in, to form a new community where Black people could flourish socially, politically, and economically in ways they were unable to back East. The Reconstruction process built up African American hopes for stability and independence after the war, but these hopes were quickly dashed by violent reprisals from disgruntled former Confederates.

Reconstruction

While the federal government was negotiating Reconstruction treaties with the Five Tribes that would absorb these Indigenous Nations into the United States, they were also negotiating the re-entry of formerly Confederate states into the Union. The Reconstruction process took on a significantly different shape in the South as compared to the Muscogee Nation. Alaina Roberts posited that the U.S. was more hesitant to demand "harsher" recourse from

¹⁰⁵ *Topeka Plaindealer*, April 28, 1916

¹⁰⁶ Monroe N. Work, *Negro Yearbook: Annual Encyclopedia of the Negro*, (Nashville: Sunday School Union Print, 1912), 166.

¹⁰⁷ "Vernon," *The Daily Times and Oklahoman*, August 3, 1984.

Southern traitors because they had shown their willingness to abscond from the Union and the government feared retribution and the dissolution of a fragile Union.¹⁰⁸ Without Southern compliance, the Union could not again become the United States, so pacifying racist White Southerners was key to the Reconstruction effort in the South.

Following the War, the federal government possessed 800,000 acres of land seized by the Union army following removal or abandonment by Confederate landowners.¹⁰⁹ Scrambling for something to do with this large swath of unused, extremely profitable land, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—known popularly as the Freedmen’s Bureau—as a subdivision of the War Department on March 3, 1865.¹¹⁰ The primary goal of the bureau was to provide essential aid to newly emancipated African Americans as they transitioned into freedom. The bureau had success with providing medical aid, rations, and education, but struggled to make strides in civil rights and land redistribution.¹¹¹ The oft-cited plan to give each freedperson “40 acres and a mule” comes not from any officials in the Freedmen’s Bureau but from Union General William T. Sherman two months before the bureau was established when he issued Special Field Order No. 15 from Savannah, Georgia. The order stated that if a Black head of household desired to settle on part of the land set aside between Charleston and the St. John’s River in Florida, the Inspector of Settlements and Plantations should give them a license to do so on no more than 40 acres.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, *I’ve Been Here All the While*, 36-37.

¹⁰⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Freedmen’s Bureau,” *Atlantic Monthly* 87 (1901): 358.

¹¹⁰ “The Freedmen’s Bureau,” African American Heritage, National Archives, n.d. <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau>

¹¹¹ Editors, “Freedmen’s Bureau,” *Brittanica Academic*, 2020, <https://academic-eb-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Freedmens-Bureau/35296>

¹¹² Mules were not directly mentioned in this order but rather came to be associated with this order later when Sherman ordered the army to lend Black settlers mules. Henry Louis Gates Jr. “The Truth Behind ‘40 Acres and a Mule’,” *The African Americans, Many Rivers to Cross* with Henry Louis Gates Jr., PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/the-truth-behind-40-acres-and-a-mule/>

This order was followed and roughly 40,000 freedmen settled on this land.¹¹³ Unfortunately, the order lacked both legislative and executive support. In fact, not long after Andrew Johnson took office on April 15, he undid the work started by Sherman and other like-minded Union officials. A Confederate sympathizer, Johnson wasted no time granting amnesty to all but the highest-ranking Confederate officials. This amnesty conferred lands and restored all property rights, save for freed enslaved persons, to any member of the rebellion who signed an oath pledging loyalty to the Union.¹¹⁴ With this amnesty, Andrew Johnson returned the land the Union army seized in the war to White Southern planters, and freedpeople's hopes for reparations were dashed. As the years of Reconstruction drew on, it became clear the government would not implement the radical changes they had considered under Lincoln. Instead, the federal government withdrew military forces, allowing Southern states to implement "Black codes" that reinforced the antebellum racial hierarchy, even without the institution of slavery. With the military gone and White Southerners' hegemony reinforced, African Americans in the South were subject to violence without recourse.

Although newly freed African Americans could not hope for reparations in the form of redistributed land, the determination to own land remained a key motivator for their actions moving forward. Black leaders, thinkers, and community members remained keenly aware of the need for racial uplift and self-determination, and they believed that land was central to achieving these goals. The inspiration for Sherman's 40 acres order actually came from a meeting he and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton had with a group of twenty Black ministers in Savannah on January 12, 1865. During that meeting, the ministers impressed upon Sherman and Stanton that:

¹¹³ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 71.

¹¹⁴ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 183.

“the way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our labor—that is, by the labor of the women, and children, and old men—and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare . . . We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it.”¹¹⁵

These ministers were not the only ones with a passion for landownership. This yearning for land has been termed “Black Agrarianism” by sociologists studying Black landownership. Black agrarianism, a variant of democratic agrarianism, conceptualizes land as a means, perhaps *the* means, to independence as it unlocks economic self-determination and therefore political autonomy. Furthermore, Black agrarianism emphasizes landownership because it allows Black landowners to cultivate relationships to land that go beyond systems of oppression; rather, land can be a site of collective autonomy and racial liberation.¹¹⁶ For newly emancipated African Americans, owning the land they tilled was key to racial liberation because controlling their labor directly defied the plantation system, in which their every movement was monitored and dictated by someone else.¹¹⁷ Landownership would also allow them to build wealth and farms they could pass down to their children, an opportunity they lacked both in slavery and in systems of tenancy and sharecropping.¹¹⁸

African Americans played on two core beliefs of democratic agrarianism when arguing for their right to landownership. First, a person earned their right to own land via agricultural labor; both before and after emancipation, African Americans argued that their labor in fact made them ideal American citizens.¹¹⁹ Second, the ideal citizen should aspire to individual land

¹¹⁵ Garrison Frazier, “Colloquy with Colored Ministers,” *The Journal of Negro History* 16, no. 1 (1931): 91, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2714000>.

¹¹⁶ Katrina Quisumbing King et al., “Black Agrarianism: The Significance of African American Landownership in the Rural South: Black Agrarianism,” *Rural Sociology* 83, no. 3 (2018): 677–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12208>.

¹¹⁷ Evan P. Bennett and Debra A. Reid, *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule: African American Landowning Families since Reconstruction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 6, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/227/monograph/book/17740>.

¹¹⁸ Bennett and Reid, *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule*, 8

¹¹⁹ Kimberly Smith, “Black Agrarianism and the Foundations of Black Environmental Thought,” *Environmental Ethics* 26, no. 3 (2004): 277, <https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics200426316>.

ownership and prioritize economic self-sufficiency. This belief stood in stark contrast to the traditional Muscogee practice of common landownership and thus highlights another cultural difference that divided African Creeks and African Americans. The system of slavery kept them from individual ownership, but many hoped that as the country reconstructed, they could own land, even if that land did not come through Sherman's order. Black thinkers generally agreed that land was key to citizenship, but they approached this belief in two opposite directions.

Roughly two schools of thought emerged surrounding land and citizenship for African Americans in the Reconstruction period. One argued that the redemptive power of agricultural labor would lead to economic self-sufficiency for Black people that would further lead to civil rights. This line of thinking is often associated with Booker T. Washington who famously argued that "no race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem."¹²⁰ In fact, Washington was a large proponent of the Black town movement; in 1904, he visited Boley and described the town as a "tribute to the race."¹²¹ The other school of thought argued that full citizenship rights were key to maintaining landownership. Without political status as full citizens, Black landownership would never be secure. W.E.B. Du Bois strongly championed this argument in *The Souls of Black Folk*: "it is utterly impossible... for workingmen and property owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage."¹²² Regardless of the contention over how to keep the land, the desire for land sat at the crux of the citizenship issue.

¹²⁰ Booker T. Washington, "Atlanta Exposition Address," in Howard Brotz, *African-American Social and Political Thought*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 357.

¹²¹ E. Davidson Washington, *Selected Speeches of Booker T. Washington*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1932) 31.

¹²² W. E. B. DuBois, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," in Brotz, *African-American Social and Political Thought*, 514.

Unfortunately, as much as African Americans wanted land, White Southerners wanted to keep them from it. Or at least keep them from owning it. States throughout the South wrote and passed a series of “Black Codes,” laws that dictated how and where African Americans could work. Primarily, these codes sought to maintain access to the thing that had made the South’s economy not only viable, but deeply profitable: cheap Black labor.¹²³ These codes included moratoriums on the sale and leasing of land to African Americans, required African American laborers to sign contracts for their labor, and prohibited them from leaving their employers on threat of wage forfeiture and arrest.¹²⁴ It was under these conditions that Sim Bow (S.B.) Dozier entered the workforce at only 14 years old. Born enslaved in 1855, Dozier—who would later construct a cotton gin, sawmill, and grist mill in Vernon—was freed from his enslaver, likely either Richard or John Dozier, in 1865.¹²⁵ Four years later, Dozier was working for Claiborne Ogletree—another former enslaver—as a farm hand.¹²⁶

Leaving the South to Move West

It soon became clear to African Americans in the South that their dream of landownership could not be realized if they stayed in place. Upon realizing this, those who had the means to leave their homes, find new land, and establish family farms did so. Dozier moved from Georgia to Louisiana in the 1870s, where he continued to work and save.¹²⁷ Movement

¹²³ Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 1992) 7-8.

¹²⁴ “Black Codes of Mississippi (1865),” In *The Civil War Era and Reconstruction: An Encyclopedia of Social, Political, Cultural and Economic History*, ed. Mary Ellen Snodgrass, (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011).

¹²⁵ There were two Dozier’s in Muscogee County, Georgia with a five-year-old boy listed on their slave schedule in 1860, Richard and John. Richard Dozier, District 8, Muscogee County, Georgia, Ancestry.com. *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010.; John Dozier, District 9, Muscogee County, Georgia, Ancestry.com. *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010.

¹²⁶ Sim Dozier, *Georgia Property Tax Digests Freedman Tax List*, District 772, 1869, Ancestry.com. *Georgia, U.S., Property Tax Digests, 1793-1892* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

¹²⁷ Dozier is on the Georgia Property tax Digests as an employee of Ogletree in 1872. In 1877, he married his wife India in Louisiana, so we know he moved from Georgia to Louisiana sometime in this period. Sim Dozier, *Georgia Property Tax Digests Freedman Tax List*, District 772, 1872, Ancestry.com. *Georgia, U.S., Property Tax Digests*,

itself was not necessarily a sign of means, at this time, the need to move around to find work was associated with financial instability, but starting—and sustaining—a farm required financial stability. Dozier would not capitalize on this stability until 1910, when he moved to Oklahoma. The Civil War and Reconstruction were not the only large events shaping the United States at this time. As the nation was cleaning up the mess in the South it was also expanding West. In fact, it was arguments over the shape the new Western states would take—whether slavery would be allowed in these places—that led to Southern secession and war in the first place.¹²⁸ With Western expansion came new large swaths of land that the U.S. government wanted American citizens to settle on and make productive. This idea of “productivity” was largely driven by the white settler supremacy mindset, but it nonetheless meant land became available for settlement. The white settler supremacy mindset exalted agriculture as the best use of available land and assumed that the lack of individually owned farms within Indigenous Nations meant the land was not being utilized the way God intended it to be. White settler supremacy then justified removing Indigenous groups from their homelands and replacing them with settlers who would use the land for its intended purpose. Although African American’s were not the government’s idea of the ideal settler—the ideal settler was White—homesteading was nonetheless available to them and many Black leaders, ministers, and newspapers encouraged their audiences, congregations, and readerships to seize the opportunities being made available to them.

1793-1892 [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011; 1900 U.S. census, Claiborne County, Louisiana, population schedule, enumeration district (ED) 17 p. 9B (penned), dwelling 156, family 156, Sim Dozier; NARA microfilm publication T 623, roll 562.

¹²⁸ For more on the role of the West in the Civil War, read recent books by Kevin Waite, *West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), Megan Kate Nelson. *The Three-Cornered War: The Union, the Confederacy, and Native Peoples in the Fight for the West* (New York: Scribner, 2020), and Steven Hahn, *A Nation without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910*. (Penguin History of the United States, 2016)

Beyond accessible land, the West drew African Americans because it was still developing. The future in the West seemed bright. Free from over 100 years of development into a racially hierarchal American society, African Americans viewed the area as a *tabula rasa*, one where a new, more equal society could be realized. The lands that would become Oklahoma Territory were especially enticing because American society was still in the early stages of being established there, compared to places like California and Oregon, or New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah territories, which had already organized with strict racialized codes. Although both Black and White would-be homesteaders gathered along border towns in Kansas in the 1870s and 1880s, only White settlers agitated for the federal government to open the “Unassigned Lands” by violating federal law and squatting on Indigenous land.¹²⁹

Still, Black migrants were not neutral on the issue of the Unassigned Lands. Once the lands in Oklahoma Territory were opened, African Americans agitating for land as a means of racial uplift began to direct their communities toward the open territory, lauding it as a veritable “promise land,” for African American migrants.¹³⁰ Migration was abetted by multiple associations for Black migration, including, notably, the Oklahoma Immigration Association, which headquartered in Lawrence, Kansas and encouraged African Americans to pack their bags and head West to the territory.¹³¹ The Oklahoma Immigration Association, founded by H.W. Rolfe, wrote to newspapers across the country and insisted that Oklahoma was the place to be. In a correspondence printed in *The New York Age*, Rolfe wrote “I say without reservation that I never saw a better outlook for the Negro, than the one now presented in the ‘promised land.’”¹³²

¹²⁹ Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 47-49.

¹³⁰ “Dug-outs are disappearing: Signs of substantial growth in Oklahoma,” *The New York Age* (New York [N.Y.]), February 22, 1890

¹³¹ Other emigration associations included the Freedmen’s Oklahoma Association, discussed in chapter 1, and the First Grand Independent Brotherhood, organized in Nicodemus, Kansas in 1889.

¹³² “Dug-outs are disappearing: Signs of substantial growth in Oklahoma,” *The New York Age* (New York [N.Y.]), February 22, 1890

Not even a week later, Rolfe wrote again to *Capper's Weekly*, a newspaper based in Topeka, Kansas, to report that “our correspondence has greatly increased and we are most agreeably surprised to learn that the negroes fully realize the importance of immediate and decided action.”¹³³ The marketing of Oklahoma as a promised land was successful; roughly 8,000 African Americans emigrated West to take part in the territory’s ten land-runs between 1889 and 1895.¹³⁴

As Oklahoma Territory filled up, settlers became unsatisfied with the territory’s land base and set their sights eastward toward Indian Territory. Indian Territory drew African Americans because of rumors that Indigenous freedpeople were flourishing with access to land and fair treatment from their former enslavers. Oklahoma Territory, populated primarily with White settlers despite the panicked claims from White Oklahomans otherwise, was already becoming infested with pervasive racism. Indian Territory seemed a chance to once again escape racial prejudice. Discussing the opportunities of Muscogee freedmen, an 1894 article claimed, “They can improve all the land they wish, if it is a thousand acres; all is necessary to claim and go to work and improve it all the cost there is attached to it is the improvement.”¹³⁵ Although African Americans had already learned that the 1866 treaty provisions for Indigenous freedmen did not apply to them, they still hoped they could seek refuge in what they viewed as a freer, more equitable place.¹³⁶

African Americans saw Afro-Indigenous people, particularly African Creeks, as kin. Even more, they viewed African identity as having redemptive power against the perceived

¹³³ “McCabe’s Boom for Governor,” *Cappers Weekly*, Topeka, KS, February 27, 1890.

¹³⁴ Wickett, *Contested Territory*, 55.

¹³⁵ *Afro-American advocate*. (Coffeyville, KS), Feb. 19, 1892.

¹³⁶ Chang, *The Color of the Land*, 154.

unsavory traits of Indigenous people whom some African Americans viewed through pernicious and false stereotypes of Indigeneity as indicative of backwardness and laziness.¹³⁷ An article printed in the *Langston City Herald* positions Blackness as above Indigeneity and Whiteness: “A few years ago [Oklahoma] was a barren wilderness, inhabited only by savage Indians and lawless white men...” But the poor traits associated with Indigeneity could be overruled by African heritage, as the article goes on to say:

“There is a large Afro-American population in [Indian Territory] many of them... have more African than Indian blood in their veins and Governor Brown, of the Creek, shows his African more than Indian blood. He is a man of education and wealth.”¹³⁸

The claim that Governor Brown shows his “African more than Indian blood,” followed immediately by the statement that “he is a man of education and wealth,” implies that those qualities come from his “African blood.” This article seems to position African blood as the harbinger of industrious qualities, while simultaneously denouncing Indigenous people as “savage.” African American migrants adopted a form of the white settler supremacy mindset, although clearly modified to reposition Blackness as superior, and reaffirmed their kinship to Afro-Indigenous people, whom they notably referred to as *Afro-Americans*. This linguistic choice was not neutral. Rather, it affirmed their belief that Blackness, regardless of ethnicity, was a unifying identity.¹³⁹ However, this unity generally came from Afro-Indigenous people denying their Indigenous heritage, which African Creeks were absolutely unwilling to do. Before statehood, when the tribal period ended, and Oklahoma adopted a constitutional development of race, this refusal by African Creeks to accept a unifying Black identity caused African

¹³⁷ Crockett, *The Black Towns*, 75; *The Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), July 28, 1900.

¹³⁸ “Will Have a Negro Senator” *Langston City Herald*, October 20, 1894. It should be noted that Governor Brown was Principal Chief of the Seminole Nation and not the Muscogee Nation.

¹³⁹ Chang, *Color of the Land*, 91.

Americans to form their own communities where they could live out the ideals of Black nationalism: political and economic self-determination.¹⁴⁰

Unable to consistently rely on African Creek buy-in, African Americans began to establish townsites of their own that remained open to—but infrequently populated by—Afro-Indigenous people. Developing these towns offered African Americans the chance to create a space where they could exercise political and economic autonomy and a new social order that did not debase them. Many of these towns began cropping up across the Twin Territories, spurred on by incoming developers, both new and experienced.

Before 1904, allottees in Indian Territory were unable to sell their land, as their land was inalienable for 4-21 years, depending on its classification as either homestead or surplus land.¹⁴¹ In 1904, Congress lifted the restrictions on land sales for those of less than one-half “Indian blood.”¹⁴² Still, many towns were founded in Indian Territory before these restrictions were lifted. Boosters acquired the land for these towns by leasing it from allottees, then buying it when the restrictions were lifted. This is how Thomas Haynes founded Boley.

Thomas M. Haynes came to Oklahoma in 1889 from a farm in Paris, Texas in a “frame wagon drawn by two gray old nags.”¹⁴³ Haynes purportedly first lived in a dugout roughly two miles East of what would eventually become Boley and befriended Black railway workers who chose to bunk overnight at the worksite rather than travel the many miles back to their homes at night.¹⁴⁴ It was in this way that Haynes met W.H. Boley, a Fort Smith and Western Railroad

¹⁴⁰ Mark Newman, *Black Nationalism in American History: From the Nineteenth Century to the Million Man March*, (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press. 2018), 2.

¹⁴¹ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 229.

¹⁴² Ellinghaus, *Blood Will Tell*, 40.

¹⁴³ A “nag” is a horse. Usually, a horse that is old and/or sick. Larrie Lance Elahi, “A History of Boley, Oklahoma, to 1915,” (MA thesis, The University of Chicago, 1968), 15, ProQuest (302394988).

¹⁴⁴ John Daniel Bell, “Boley: A Study of a Negro City” (Lawrence, University of Kansas, 1928), 9-10, <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/entities/publication/aa49d2e8-fb7f-48d6-b113-8c1992b96bfa>.

roadmaster, and Lake Moore, an attorney from Weleetka, Indian Territory. Moore and Boley, impressed by Haynes' amicable nature, hired him for a new venture: founding a town.

Moore, Boley, and Haynes first leased 160 acres of land belonging to a Muscogee freedwoman, Abigail Barnett for their new townsite.¹⁴⁵ After the restrictions were lifted, the group bought the land and platted it to be a townsite. The town was officially incorporated in 1905 when Haynes brought the incorporation petition, signed by 200 of Boley's residents, to the federal court in Sapulpa.¹⁴⁶ Haynes then took on the challenge of further promoting the town. He hired agents to travel through the South to advertise the town, wrote to ministers to ask them to promote Boley to their congregations, and placed ads in newspapers to advertise the available lots.¹⁴⁷

His advertising worked well, and in 1911 the city had roughly 7,000 citizens.¹⁴⁸ At this point, though, Haynes had already moved on to a new venture: Vernon. Emboldened by his success and newly married to his wife Julia, in 1910 Haynes moved roughly 40 miles Southeast along the burgeoning Fort Smith and Western Railroad to a lot just outside the town of Hannah, where he purchased 160 acres of land from a White land dealer named B. O. Sims.¹⁴⁹ After purchasing that land, Haynes had the land platted into 45 one-acre segments, each further subdivided into roughly 24 lots. Haynes then got to work turning the land into a town.

¹⁴⁵ Because Abigail was a minor at the time, the group made their deal with her father. Larrie Lance Elahi, "A History of Boley, Oklahoma, to 1915," (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 1968), 16-17, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (302394988).

¹⁴⁶ Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration*, 81.

¹⁴⁷ Bell, "Boley," 12. Bell claims to have gotten this information directly from the migrants who populated Boley, including Haynes himself, though he offers no direct quotes.

¹⁴⁸ Johnson, *Acres of Aspiration*, 82.

¹⁴⁹ *Numerical Index to Lands*, Township 9 Range 13, Section 34, McIntosh County Clerk's Office. Benjamin O. Sims, 1920 US Census, Okfuskee County, Oklahoma, population schedule, enumeration district (ED) 159, p. 243 (stamped), dwelling 169, family 189, Benjamin O. Simms; NARA microfilm publication T625_1478.; Thomas Haynes, Oklahoma, U.S., County Marriage Records, 1890-1995, Ancestry.com. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016. Original data: Marriage Records. Oklahoma Marriages. Various Oklahoma County marriage collections.

Haynes began to advertise the available lots both in and out of Oklahoma (see figure 3). Frequently, he called on folks who had purportedly “failed to grasp” the opportunity to purchase Boley real estate to make a proactive choice and bring their industry to Vernon.¹⁵⁰ Haynes also played on the vision of Oklahoma as the promised land: “it is plain to see that Oklahoma is the promised land for the Negro.”¹⁵¹ African Americans were still moving out of the South, and Haynes was determined to bring them to Vernon.

¹⁵⁰ “Facts about Vernon, Okla.,” *The Weekly Progress* (Boley, Oklahoma), December 21, 1911.

¹⁵¹ “Facts about Vernon, Okla.,” *The Weekly Progress* (Boley, Oklahoma), December 21, 1911.

FACTS ABOUT VERNON, OKLA.

Since the Opening of Vernon

From the 15th. of February 1911, the population has increased from five inhabitants to several hundred in and around Vernon.

Business Enterprises

Among the business enterprises are five business houses, one cotton gin, one grist mill, one hotel, one saw mill, one public school, two organized churches and several other enterprises.

The Present needs of Vernon

A good Blacksmith shop, a good Drug store, a good Meat market, a Livery barn, a General merchandise store and other enterprises.

Lots and Farm Lands

There has already been sold quite a number of resident and business blocks, several hundred acres of farm land. People are taking advantage of the opportunity at Vernon, that they failed to grasp in the infancy of Boley. Mr. Haynes' advice to his people has always been to secure Real estate and make substantial citizens and permanent locations and this opinion is being substantiated by the manifestation of the amount of town and farm property purchased since the opening of Boley and Vernon.

For further information, write T. M. Haynes
Boley, Okla. Box 86.

Figure 3. *The Weekly Progress* (Boley, OK) December 21, 1911

Once again, his advertising was a success, and Haynes drew in families by the dozens in the early years of the town. For example, in the two-month period of December 1915 to January 1916, forty-five new families moved to Vernon.¹⁵² The town attracted S.B. Dozier, who built a sawmill, grist mill, and cotton gin. In 1910, the Dozier family packed up and left Louisiana for

¹⁵² "Vernon, Oklahoma: A Negro Town," *The Topeka Plaindealer*, April 28, 1916.

Oklahoma, answering Haynes' call to Vernon. Dozier bought 32 town lots from Haynes on October 10, 1910.¹⁵³ Seeing that Black farmers were unable to get fair prices for the crops they carefully grew, he built his grist mill and cotton gin to give his neighbors the chance to process their goods at a fair price. These efforts, completed in 1916, allowed new landowners to turn a profit from their farms.¹⁵⁴ Dozier, with his entrepreneurial and community-minded spirit, was exactly who Haynes' envisioned when he called for "substantial citizens" to come to his new town.¹⁵⁵

Proponents of the Black town movement did not just want African Americans writ large to come to their towns, they wanted people who were financially stable and capable of building up the town's economy. One promotional piece for Clearview declared "the *better* class of colored people are invited to come..." and *The Langston City Herald* regularly warned potential migrants to "come prepared or not at all."¹⁵⁶ This distinction was less about class-based exclusion, although class divisions were present in all-Black towns as elsewhere, than a warning about the harsh realities of migration and operating small-town businesses. Establishing successful businesses and farms was hard, financially draining work, even when the conditions were favorable. Because promoters did not want new citizens coming to their towns and then going bankrupt, they encouraged only those with ambitious spirits and the finances to back those spirits, to migrate.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ *Numerical Index to Town Lots, Vernon*, McIntosh County Clerk's Office.

¹⁵⁴ Clarence Lee Baccus, "Dozier Building," City of Vernon Chamber of Commerce, <https://www.cityofvernon-ok.org/dozier>

¹⁵⁵ "Facts About Vernon, Okla." *The Weekly Progress* (Boley, OK) December 21, 1911

¹⁵⁶ "Come Prepared or Not at All," *Langston City Herald*, November 17, 1892.

¹⁵⁷ Kendra Taira Field, *Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 94.

Vernon was successful in drawing precisely that class of citizen. The town attracted craftsmen, hosting a physician, two blacksmiths, a veterinarian surgeon, a shoemaker, and a contractor.¹⁵⁸ The area also quickly became a hub for business and had three grocery stores, a dry goods store, a cafe, a bakery, and a telephone line.¹⁵⁹ That so many of these businesses were established, and seemingly flourished, speaks to the combination of favorable conditions and successful advertising by Haynes. Vernon was built near a railroad, which meant that the economy was not insular, and goods could flow out while money could flow in and then be spent at Vernon businesses. The circulation of money within the town was key to economic viability.¹⁶⁰ Vernon achieved its goal of economic viability and in doing so, created a space where African Americans could be financially stable and politically autonomous.

Vernon, and communities like it, played a key role in American culture taking hold in Indian Territory. Further, these communities created an environment for the Black nationalist movement to flourish. Historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses argues that Black nationalism is “the reaction of a formerly disunited group to a sense of mutual oppression.”¹⁶¹ We can see this in the sense of unity migrants coming out of the South—and some from the Midwest and the North—expressed; they used encompassing terms like “Negro” and “Afro-American” to describe their common experiences with each other. As we have seen over the past two chapters, this sense of unity did not extend to African Creeks because they did not want to emphasize their African heritage over their Indigenous roots. African Creeks did not believe the mutual experiences of slavery overruled the differences between American and Muscogee culture; they were especially

¹⁵⁸ “Vernon, Oklahoma: A Negro Town,” *The Topeka Plaindealer*, April 28, 1916.

¹⁵⁹ “Vernon, Oklahoma: A Negro Town,” *The Topeka Plaindealer*, April 28, 1916.

¹⁶⁰ Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877-1915*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 104.

¹⁶¹ Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 16.

protective of Muscogee culture because of the encroachment of the United States and the impending dissolution of Indigenous sovereignty. However, as statehood approached, African Americans and African Creeks began to share experiences that caused them to feel that “sense of mutual oppression.” Because of these shared experiences and their newfound need for safety and political alliances with each other, the two groups began to overlook their differences in order to form inter-cultural alliances.

Chapter 3

Coming Together: Statehood and Beyond

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“The drama of democracy proceeds through a warfare of words and symbolic actions by which we seek to advance our private interests by resolving our political differences.”

Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*

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On July 3, 1904, William Murray Baccus and Rebella Hutton signed their marriage license at the U.S. Western District Court in Muskogee, Indian Territory.¹⁶² Willie Baccus, as he liked to be called, was an African American man born in Allen, Texas. His wife, Rebella, was an African Creek woman, the granddaughter of Joe Hutton and the cousin of Walter Hutton, the first postmaster of Huttonville. The couple met when Baccus left his home in Texas to pursue opportunities he had heard were available in Indian Territory. At the time of their marriage, they listed Huttonville as their place of residence. In 1925, Baccus became the sheriff of Vernon, Oklahoma.

The union of William and Rebella shows how, despite cultural differences, African Americans and African Creeks could, and did, come together. Huttonville and Vernon were established in distinct ways by members of two distinct cultural groups, African Creeks and African Americans. But the towns served similar functions in creating a haven for their residents against anti-Black racism. As statehood approached, the need for this protection grew and the two groups formed alliances, both political and quotidian, in order to shelter themselves and their community. These alliances were not born out of a sudden idyllic desire to embrace each other as kin, although some did, but rather a pragmatic need to defend against rising anti-Black sentiments in Oklahoma. Black Oklahomans were facing new challenges, challenges they had

¹⁶² Marriage License No. 440, Ancestry.com. *Oklahoma, U.S., County Marriage Records, 1890-1995* [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016.

already worked hard to get away from: economic suppression, political exclusion, and social degradation. The desire to protect what they had built—Vernon, Huttonville, and other communities—outweighed the desire to maintain insularity in their communities. In fact, they instead sought to build a broader community network that went beyond their towns. An alliance between African Americans and African Creeks came at a time when White Oklahomans were using the formation of a new state to implement a racial hierarchy that debased Black Oklahomans, regardless of ethnicity.

Rise of Racism

As statehood approached, anti-Black racism ran rampant among White settlers. African American migrants came out of the South in order to escape the rigid racial hierarchy there, but much of the new White population came from the South as well.¹⁶³ These former Confederates brought their white supremacist beliefs with them. The influx of Black migrants and the nationwide campaigns for Black settlement in the West had White settlers worried about Black domination, despite the fact that Black people still made up a relatively small percentage of the territorial population.¹⁶⁴ Racist White settlers began fearmongering about the threat of Black take-over. So thorough was this campaign against Black presence in the state that when Oklahoma began electing representatives for its constitutional convention, race was a key issue in every campaign.

In 1906, Congress passed the Enabling Act which authorized the constitutional convention and began a series of campaigns to fill the 112 seats that would decide the shape the

¹⁶³ Roberts, *I've Been Here All the While*, 98.

¹⁶⁴ Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 38.

new state would take.¹⁶⁵ Both the Democratic and Republican parties made race a central component of their campaigns, but with differing stability. Democrats staunchly swore to uphold the tenets of white supremacy, promising to integrate Jim Crow policies into the text of the proposed Oklahoma convention. They played on the fears of White settlers over Black “domination” and promised to represent the interests of the White majority. An opinion piece in the *Daily Oklahoman* warned voters that “there will be...no relief from the conditions of which they complain until power is given to the party which is free from negro influences.”¹⁶⁶ The article referred to only one condition, integrated passenger trains and waiting rooms, but White people’s concerns went much deeper than trains and their waiting rooms. White supremacy had so infected their brains that they believed the very act of existing in any space with Black people where Black people were not taking on a subservient role was an indignity. Its supporters resolutely insisted that only the Democratic party could recreate the racial hierarchy of the South.

Republicans moved with significantly less confidence, at first openly courting the Black vote, but later adopting an anti-Black stance. Relying on the relationship built between African American voters and the GOP during the Civil War, some Republican leaders promised Black voters some small political offices in exchange for their vote. At the same time, a “lily-white” faction was growing within the party that began to reject Black voters. This faction reflected a larger trend of sacrificing relationships with Black voters in order to appeal to White voters to try and compete with the hold of the Democratic party that permeated the South.¹⁶⁷ Lily-white

¹⁶⁵ Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 34-35.

¹⁶⁶ “The Race Issue,” *Daily Oklahoman*, (Oklahoma City), October 31, 1906.

¹⁶⁷ Boris Heersink and Jeffery A. Jenkins, “Whiteness and the Emergence of the Republican Party in the Early Twentieth-Century South,” *Studies in American Political Development* 34, no. 1 (2020): 71–90, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X19000208>.

republicans claimed that the party had already fulfilled their obligation to Black people and began to adopt segregationist policies at Republican conventions leading up to the vote.¹⁶⁸

In the end, the Democratic party's decisiveness on the race question won the votes of the majority in Oklahoma. Democrats won 100 of 112 seats; White Oklahomans wanted separatism. The constitutional convention carried on debates on race in Oklahoma, with delegates openly favoring segregation. The convention elected William H. Murray, who would later become governor of Oklahoma, as the convention president. In his inaugural speech, Murray echoed and added to calls for Jim Crow laws and claimed, "it is an entirely false notion that the negro can rise to the equal of a white man in the professions or become an equal citizen to grapple with public question."¹⁶⁹ Delegates called for provisions for separate coaches, waiting rooms, and schools to be added, as well as laws against intermarriage.¹⁷⁰

However, the convention was bound by the parameters of the 1906 Enabling Act, which expressly forbade "distinction in civil or political rights on account of race."¹⁷¹ Convention members feared that a document including provisions for Jim Crow would prevent the constitution from getting past President Roosevelt who had said "if they keep the Jim Crow law in the Constitution, under the enabling act, I can't issue the statehood proclamation."¹⁷² In the end, the convention created a provision for segregation on the railways that set a precedent for

¹⁶⁸ Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 37-38; Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans*, 136.

¹⁶⁹ *Proceedings of the Proposed State of Oklahoma Held at Guthrie, Oklahoma. November 20, 1906, to November 16, 1907.* (Muskogee, Oklahoma: Muskogee printing Company, n.d.), 21-22.

¹⁷⁰ Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans*, 140.

¹⁷¹ Clinton O. Bunn and William C. Bunn, *Constitution and Enabling Act of the State of Oklahoma: Annotated and Indexed*, (Ardmore: Bunn Brothers, 1907): 144.

¹⁷² Oscar P. Fowler, *The Haskell Regime: The Intimate Life of Charles Nathaniel Haskell* (Oklahoma City: The Boles Printing Co., 1933), 173-174.

future Jim Crow laws to be enacted, once the state had entered the Union and established a proper legislature.¹⁷³

It was in the very first legislative session that segregationists began to implement their policies. First, segregation was upheld on railroads in coaches and waiting rooms. This was accompanied by a move to segregate schools and prohibit interracial marriages. This would ostensibly forbid the marriage between Willie and Rebella, as the constitution defined “colored” as anyone with African descent and “white” as everyone else and Rebella was enrolled on the “by-blood” rolls, not as a freedwoman.

The implementation of segregationist policies in Oklahoma following statehood led to a sharp increase in racialized violence in the state. From 1885 to 1907, Oklahoma saw 106 lynchings across racial lines, while nationally the number sat at 2,996, making up just 3% of all national lynchings.¹⁷⁴ In nationwide statistics, Black deaths made up 70% of all lynchings between 1885 and 1907, but in Oklahoma, Black deaths made up 16% of all incidents during the same time.¹⁷⁵ Nationally, Black people were majorly overrepresented among lynching victims, averaging only 12% of the population whilst making up 70% of the victims; in Oklahoma, this remained true, but the numbers were lower. Black people made up 16% of lynching victims while being only 8% of the territorial population.¹⁷⁶ So, lynchings of Black people were relatively rare in the territorial period; however, the percentage of Black victims among

¹⁷³ Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 42.

¹⁷⁴ Dianna Everett, “Lynching,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=LY001>; “Lynching stats: Year, Dates, Causes,” Tuskegee Institute Archives, 2020, <https://archive.tuskegee.edu/repository/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Lynchings-Stats-Year-Dates-Causes.pdf>.

¹⁷⁵ Everett, “Lynching,”; “Lynching stats: Year, Dates, Causes.”

¹⁷⁶ “Lynching stats: Year, Dates, Causes.”; Department of Commerce, “Black Population 1790-1915,” (United States Census Bureau, Government Printing Office: Washington, 1918); Everett, “Lynching.”; Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope*, 131.

lynchings in Oklahoma rose considerably after statehood. There were 147 total lynchings recorded in Oklahoma between 1885 and 1930.¹⁷⁷ Forty-one of these occurred after statehood, and 33 of the 41 victims were Black. This means that the percentage of Black victims rose from 16% to 80% after statehood (see figure 4).¹⁷⁸

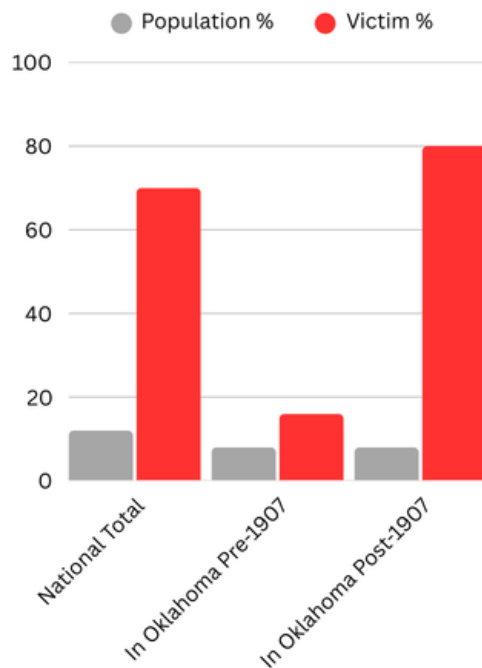


Figure 4. Black Lynchings Nationwide compared to Oklahoma. Made by Elizabeth Thomas.

There are two reasons for this shift. First, Oklahoma's established legislature introduced a more efficient law enforcement division that could handle the issues of robbery and rustling, the two primary reported reasons for lynchings in the pre-statehood era.¹⁷⁹ Second, the election of overwhelmingly racist legislators created a culture that emboldened the racist beliefs and actions

¹⁷⁷ Everett, "Lynching."

¹⁷⁸ These numbers were also likely higher than written here, due to underreporting.

¹⁷⁹ Everett, "Lynching."

of White Oklahomans. A longer excerpt of constitutional convention president William Murray's inaugural address demonstrates some of these beliefs:

“I am a descendant of an ex-slave holder, reared in a community where freedmen were in the majority. I know them from ‘A’ to ‘Z.’ I know their traits... I appreciate the old-time ex-slave, the old darky—and they are the salt of the earth of their race—who come to me talking softly in that humble spirit *which should characterize their action and dealing with the white man*, and when they thus come they can get any favor from me.”¹⁸⁰

Another prominent politician, State Senator J.C. Graham, fathered a bill that prohibited interracial marriage. Reporting on the bill, a paper noted Graham “never permits an opportunity to pass to draw the lines between the white and negro races.” The insistence that a line had to be drawn between races and that Black people had to show deference for White people created an environment where White people felt comfortable enforcing their hegemony with deadly violence. Violence also stemmed from the fear that Black people were “taking over” the state.

Even though the relative population of Black Oklahomans remained low, White Oklahomans still feared Black “domination.” As mentioned above, Black people made up only 8% of the territorial population; however, reading White newspapers, one would never guess that number was so low. There were countless sensational pieces written in the territorial period that riled White settlers. One paper claimed there were “200,000 negroes in the South organized for settlement in Oklahoma.”¹⁸¹ White settlers irrationally feared what may happen if Black people held positions of power, though news articles never expounded on what exactly they feared would happen if Black people held those positions. The article continued that in a few years, Oklahoma could see “two negro Senators at Washington.”¹⁸² Apparently, the thought of Black

¹⁸⁰ Emphasis mine. *Proceedings of the Proposed State of Oklahoma Held at Guthrie, Oklahoma. November 20, 1906, to November 16, 1907.* (Muskogee, Oklahoma: Muskogee printing Company, n.d.), 21-22.

¹⁸¹ “A Negro State,” *New York Post*, reprinted in the *Ketchum Keystone* (Ketchum, Idaho), June 18, 1892.

¹⁸² “A Negro State,” *New York Post*, reprinted in the *Ketchum Keystone* (Ketchum, Idaho), June 18, 1892.

people holding positions of power was frightening enough that newspapers did not feel the need to expound on the supposed danger they posed. They also feared economic competition from Black Oklahomans and what that could mean for their own agricultural and business endeavors. This fear was buttressed by the economic success of Black towns throughout the state.

Inter-cultural Alliances

Although there were still significant cultural divides between African Americans and African Creeks, White people saw the two groups forming a significant population bloc that could threaten their self-perceived supremacy. African Creeks still retained Muscogee cultural practices. African Americans sought out churches with congregations mostly made up of other African Americans, even if an African Creek church was closer to their home.¹⁸³ White Oklahomans did not care about the differences between Afro-Indigenous and African American cultures. When asked about African Creeks, one White Oklahoman said “all n****rs are the same. You can’t trust one of them behind your back. Creek n****rs are n****rs just like the rest of them. They haven’t the mentality of a white man.”¹⁸⁴ Another contemptuously added “They all come out of Africa, didn’t they?”¹⁸⁵ They cared about maximizing their land and power, about creating a new racial order in Oklahoma that maximized their opportunities while minimizing the rights of Oklahoma’s Black citizens. The welcome reception of Southern politician “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman, who toured several cities in Oklahoma, including Muskogee, to advocate for repealing the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments which would “relieve the south of the gloomy prospect of being governed by an inferior race,” and allow White people to

¹⁸³ Sameth, *Creek Negroes*, 55.

¹⁸⁴ I chose to censor this word, despite it being in quotes, because I believe the harm of the term outweighs the benefit of having it in the text when it is so easily identifiable. Sameth, *Creek Negroes*, 49.

¹⁸⁵ Sameth, *Creek Negroes*, 49.

assert their self-perceived supremacy, demonstrates the desire of White Oklahomans to tear down Black people.¹⁸⁶

Realizing the threat that White supremacists posed to their safety, African Americans and African Creeks began to form alliances that could shield them from the worst of these threats. Some of the bonds were social, as shown in the marriage between Willie and Rebella, which is not the only of its kind. In interviews for his 1940 thesis on African Creeks, Sigmund Sameth reported a dozen African American-African Creek marriages.¹⁸⁷ However, many of the bonds were forged in political and economic spheres.

As early as 1904, Black Oklahomans began organizing intercultural political alliances. Seeing how dire the perpetuation of Jim Crow had become, the Suffrage League of Indian Territory issued a call to a meeting to be held in Muskogee, Oklahoma, roughly sixty miles from Vernon and Huttonville.¹⁸⁸ At the meeting, held on August 16, 1904, league members “memorialized the senate of the United States for a speedy passage of the statehood measure...upon terms of absolute equality.”¹⁸⁹ The meeting was attended by 300 delegates of both African American and Afro-Indigenous heritage. The delegates elected ten officers, within this list, every one of the Five Tribes was represented along with the African American community.¹⁹⁰ During the meeting, the league adopted a platform that resolutely supported equal suffrage “for all citizens regardless of color.”¹⁹¹ The group also prepared a petition to the Senate, asking them to amend the proposed statehood bill, known as the “Hamilton Bill,” to guarantee

¹⁸⁶ “Senator Tillman Talks on the Race Question,” *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, October 20, 1906.

¹⁸⁷ Sameth, “Creek Negroes,” 58.

¹⁸⁸ “Mass Convention Call,” *Pauls Valley Sentinel*, July 16, 1904.

¹⁸⁹ “Mass Convention Call,” *Pauls Valley Sentinel*, July 16, 1904.

¹⁹⁰ “Permanently Organized,” *The Wagoner Echo*, August 18, 1904.

¹⁹¹ “Want Suffrage for All,” *The Coffeyville Daily Journal*, August 18, 1904.

“unabridged suffrage” for all.¹⁹² The group also elected C. J. Jones, of Muskogee, to visit Washington, D.C., as a representative of the organization and plead their case to Congress directly. Unfortunately, no newspaper account of the trip ever emerged, so we cannot know precisely what Jones achieved on his trip.

The next year, as statehood inched closer, White residents of the Twin Territories organized a statehood convention in Muskogee, hosting roughly 1,000 delegates.¹⁹³ Among the attendees, only 7 were Black; none were invited to sit in the convention.¹⁹⁴ Enraged, the Suffrage League once again organized a meeting, a statehood convention of their own on August 25, 1905.¹⁹⁵ The convention was attended by 218 delegates who resolved to organize the convention into a permanent organization known as the Negro Protective League of Oklahoma and Indian Territories, later renamed to the Inter-Territorial Negro Protective League and then again to the Negro Protective League of the State of Oklahoma.¹⁹⁶ The league resolved to seek out and protect Black interests within the state, irrespective of cultural divides.

Prior to the state constitutional convention, the league adopted a series of resolutions denouncing Jim Crow policies:

“Resolved, that we pledge ourselves to the support of every delegate or representative upon a platform maintaining and enforcing a constitution embodying all those principles which stand for every man and his interest alike. Which will deprive no man of the right to vote on account of his race color or previous condition of servitude, and we oppose any property or educational test for voting and we favor provisions which will secure to every man equal civil and political rights within the spirit and meaning of the broadest interpretation of the constitution of the United States.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹² “Want Suffrage for All,” *The Coffeyville Daily Journal*, August 18, 1904.

¹⁹³ Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans*, 131.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ “The Negroes Will Meet,” *The Emporia Gazette*, September 14, 1905.

¹⁹⁶ Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans*, 132-133.

¹⁹⁷ “Resolutions Passed by Negro Protective League, State of Oklahoma,” *Muskogee Cimiter*, September 13, 1906.

The resolutions did not solely discuss constitutional policy. They also encouraged the formation of “leagues or local clubs in [Black] communities... and the establishment of a ready medium of communication in a centralized system of our organization.”¹⁹⁸ This statement demonstrates that the goals of the league were not short-term and focused only on Oklahoma’s new constitution. Rather, the league desired to create a social network that would connect Black communities and protect common interests of “our race.” Further, the multi-ethnic composition of the league and the use of phrases such as “our race” and “our people” show that African Creeks and African Americans were putting cultural differences aside to claim a cohesive racial identity, which they had not done up until this point.

Clearly, these cross-cultural bonds were not only political. They were also built on ideas of economic uplift and social connections. Citizens of the towns frequently intermixed on social calls. Newspapers, like *The Black Dispatch*, reported on the community goings-on in the towns, offering some insight into the social lives of Black town residents and expanding the community networks of Black Oklahomans beyond their towns. Resident reporters, like Don Busby of Vernon, would gather community news and share it with the *Dispatch*, headquartered in Oklahoma City. For example, in 1925, when Willie and Rebella traveled from Vernon to watch the Vernon-Clearview basketball game hosted in Clearview, the *Dispatch* recorded it.¹⁹⁹ This is likely precisely what the Protective League resolution was calling for when they urged Black Oklahomans to create communication networks between the towns.

Still, these bonds were at their core pragmatic. The two groups’ willingness to co-mingle came not from a sudden, idyllic desire to come together as a community unified by one race.

¹⁹⁸ “Resolutions Passed by Negro Protective League, State of Oklahoma,” *Muskogee Cimiter*, September 13, 1906.

¹⁹⁹ “Muskogee,” *The Black Dispatch*, (Oklahoma City, OK) March 26, 1925.

Rather, the connections provided them with a social safety net, as did the towns, because they were expanding the reach of the towns beyond their borders and creating a web of Black support in Oklahoma. Sameth's work exemplifies the pragmatic nature of these bonds; he interviewed many African Creeks who openly discussed their distaste for African Americans. This work was published in 1940, well after the adoption of a unified Black identity. Despite beginning to self-identify as Black, African Creeks were still claiming their Indigenous heritage. Although the groups had gathered to protect their rights, there was still animosity there. Still, these bonds would continually be drawn upon in the upcoming years as anti-Black racism continued to impact the lives of Black Oklahomans. Even today, Black towns emphasize the connections between Afro-Indigenous and African American groups as they seek to keep their communities and economies viable.

Conclusion: Black Towns in the Modern Age

The home of William and Rebella Baccus is one of the few remaining original structures in Vernon. The home was originally built in 1898 as an office for Fort Smith & Western Railway officials. In 1906, when the company no longer needed the satellite office, Thomas Haynes took control of the property, mortgaging it in 1909 to Lucy Taylor—a migrant from Denton, Texas—and fully selling the property to Taylor in 1912. The next year, Taylor sold the property to Andy Walker—also from Denton—who died three years later. His estate sat in legal limbo for four years before his brother was finally appointed administrator. Walker’s brother, Benjamin, sold the property to Willie and Rebella that same year, 1919. The couple moved into Vernon from their farm that was just outside Huttonville with all but their two oldest sons who remained to run the farm.

After buying the building, Willie got to work converting the five-room, T-shaped building into a home. He carved three bedrooms and a living room out of the existing space, then added a kitchen to the end of the home, lengthening the center wing. Once the building was renovated, Mr. and Mrs. Baccus made it their home with the four children who came with them to Vernon. Mr. & Mrs. Baccus continued to remotely manage their farm; in 1925, S.B. Dozier, the town sheriff passed away, and Vernon elected Mr. Baccus to be the new sheriff. Mrs. Baccus lived in the home as a homemaker until her death in 1968, while Mr. Baccus remained until his passing in 1974. Rebella’s funeral was held in Huttonville’s New Hope Baptist Church and attended by over 300 people.²⁰⁰ Both Mr. & Mrs. Baccus were buried in the Huttonville Cemetery. That the family chose to lay the couple to rest in Huttonville, rather than in Vernon, shows the strong connection that remained for the family to Huttonville and the relationship

²⁰⁰ Baccus, Clarence L. “Baccus Home,” City of Vernon Chamber of Commerce. <https://www.cityofvernon-ok.org/baccus-home>

between the towns. The home has never passed out of the hands of the Baccus family and is currently the home of one of Willie and Rebella's grandchildren.²⁰¹

With weathered wood siding, once painted a pale green, and a red roof missing many shingles, the house is in need of intensive restoration, a goal the Vernon Chamber of Commerce is working hard to accomplish. Under the provision of Willie and Rebella's grandson, Mr. Clarence Baccus Jr., the group applied and successfully registered the home on the National Register of Historic Places.²⁰² This designation will allow the Chamber to begin fundraising in earnest and apply for grants to aid in the process. Once the Baccus home and the Dozier building—also registered on the National Register of Historic Places as the “Rock Front” and the site of S.B. Dozier's dry goods store—have been adequately restored, the Chamber plans to turn them into museums. “The original railroad station is gone,” Mr. Baccus told me, “but we'll put up a replica.”²⁰³

Vernon is not the only Oklahoma Black town with an active interest in protecting its legacy through the preservation and restoration of its historic sites. The town of Boley hosts an annual rodeo, the oldest African American rodeo in the nation, to support the Boley Museum and Welcome Center and the preservation of their historic district, which achieved recognition on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.²⁰⁴ Grayson, a town in Okmulgee County, puts on an annual gumbo festival to support its restoration of the high school, which Clara Luper

²⁰¹ Phone conversation with Clarence L. Baccus, grandson of Willie and Rebella and Historian and executive director for the Vernon Chamber of Commerce, February 28, 2025.

²⁰² Terrie Gables, “Two state properties added to National Register of Historic Places,” *Oklahoma News 4*, April 21, 2025. <https://kfor.com/news/local/two-okla-properties-added-to-national-register-of-historic-places/>.

²⁰³ Conversation with Clarence Baccus Jr.

²⁰⁴ “Boley, Oklahoma: A Legacy of Black Excellence and Resilience,” About, the Town of Boley, <https://www.thetownofboley.org/about>; “Boley Historic District”. *National Historic Landmark summary listing*. National Park Service. Archived from the original on December 14, 2009. <https://web.archive.org/web/20091214091703/http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=1563&ResourceType=District>

attended.²⁰⁵ The Tullahassee Wildcats Foundation, based in the town in Wagoner County, seeks to “redevelop” the community, preserving historic structures while also fostering youth engagement to encourage the town’s longevity.²⁰⁶ There is a group called the Black Town Collective, a multi-town group that focuses on town restoration, community education, land and business ownership, and wealth generation.²⁰⁷ The mayors of Oklahoma’s incorporated Black towns host annual meetings at the Oklahoma Historical Society to network and share resources to keep their towns vibrant.²⁰⁸

The desire to preserve these towns is clearly not fading. These towns continue to draw attention, and new residents, because they represent sites of political, social, and economic uplift for Black Americans. Rather than focusing solely on stores of oppression and injustice, these places make people think about greatness in Black life and Black contributions to Oklahoma and America writ large. Tourism has been increasing in Oklahoma’s Black towns since 2012.²⁰⁹ The rodeo in Boley attracts tens of thousands of visitors each year.²¹⁰

I myself have been able to visit a few of these areas. In 2023, I attended the gumbo festival in Grayson and was able to walk around the old high school building. I made many trips out to Eufaula, Oklahoma, the McIntosh County seat, to look at land records in the courthouse.

²⁰⁵ Clara Luper was a prominent educator and activist in the Civil Rights Movement, who organized the sit-ins at Katz Drug Store in OKC, the first of their kind in the nation. Stefanie Lee Decker, “Luper, Clara Shepard,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=LU005>.; Kimberly Burk, “Grayson is seeking funding to restore the high school Clara Luper attended,” *The Oklahoman*, December 15, 2024. <https://www.oklahoman.com/story/opinion/columns/2024/12/15/oklahoma-black-town-grayson-gumbo-festival-annually/75337489007/>

²⁰⁶ “Home,” Tullahassee Wildcats Foundation, <https://www.wildcatsfoundation.org/>

²⁰⁷ “Home,” Black Town Collective, <https://blacktowncollective.org/home1>

²⁰⁸ “2nd-Annual Oklahoma Conference of Black Mayors Takes Place at State Capitol,” News 9 (Oklahoma City), August 13, 2023. “Oklahoma All-Black Towns State Conference,” *Events, Oklahoma Historical Society*, <https://www.okhistory.org/calendar/event/oklahoma-all-black-towns-state-conference/>

²⁰⁹ Karla Slocum, *Black Towns, Black Futures: The Enduring Allure of a Black Place in the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 2019), 138.

²¹⁰ Anjelicia Bruton, Historic Boley Rodeo Set For Needed Upgrades,” *News 9* (Oklahoma City, OK), November 2, 2023.

On my first trip out to Eufaula, during my Public History course when I was first introduced to Huttonville, my group mates and I stopped to visit the area on our way home.²¹¹ We briefly visited the church before exploring the cemetery, where the history of the community could be felt in every step. Seeing headstones made in 1900 only a few paces from headstones made in 2020 reminded me just how very real and immediate these stories are.

My trip to Vernon was even more brief. Eufaula is pretty much a straight shot east from my own home, I turn right out of my neighborhood onto Oklahoma State Highway 9, drive for two hours, then turn onto First street in Eufaula and into the parking lot of the county courthouse. About twenty minutes outside of Eufaula is a small green sign that reads “Vernon 4 →.” In my little four-door sedan, it took me ten minutes to get down that four mile stretch gravel road and another ten to lap around the town. I was not able to stop anywhere, though I did park to read the historic marker outside the community center. Still, even only driving through the town, I was struck by the sense of history that permeated the air, of people rooted to the land, not by debt or exploitation, but by history and love for their community.

The population of these towns fluctuates, a common pattern felt more acutely by any small town, but they are projected to grow as younger Americans express a desire to return to rural spaces.²¹² Some of these younger Americans are Black, others are not. The demographics of Oklahoma’s *historically* all-Black towns is actually shifting, a phenomenon Karla Slocum examines in much more depth in her work.²¹³ Since 2020, Vernon’s population has risen from 43

²¹¹ Eufaula and Huttonville are very close. As the nearest economic center, Eufaula would have played an important role in Huttonville’s economy. However, as a sundown town, Eufaula very strictly enforced segregationist regulations that prevented Huttonville residents from finding or participating in community there.

²¹² Beatrice J. Adams, "Habitual Return." *Southern Cultures* 30, no. 2 (2024): 30-43.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/scu.2024.a934712>.

²¹³ The conversation around shifting demographics in all-Black towns is fascinating. Read about it in Karla Slocum’s *Black Towns, Black Futures: The Enduring Allure of s Black Place in the American West*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

to 53, not an insignificant number as any new residents bring talents and energy that benefit the social and economic life of the area.²¹⁴

These stories are not only significant because they are interesting. Rather, the stories of Huttonville and Vernon reinforce important understandings about Black identity in Oklahoma. There are a series of varied experiences held by a myriad of ethnic groups within African-descended peoples that can be understood by examining the founding of these towns. African Creeks and African Americans did not initially form strong communal bonds and kinship networks when African Americans migrated to Oklahoma and Indian Territories. Rather, the cultural differences between the groups were thrown into stark relief and they formed separate communities. However, as statehood approached, anti-Black racism rose rapidly. In order to protect themselves from this racism, Black Oklahomans began to form inter-cultural bonds.

To provide a fuller picture of Black Oklahoma history, scholars must continue to build on these understandings. Researching the connections and tensions among varying Afro-Indigenous groups is one potential area for study. How community bonds contributed to success in Black towns is another. Further, what exactly success looks like in Black towns, especially long-term success, can challenge the assumption by many that the majority of Black towns “failed.”²¹⁵ Studies like these will bring new and important stories to the forefront of Oklahoma’s historical landscape.

²¹⁴ Population number given by Clarence L. Baccus in email exchange, March 5, 2025.

²¹⁵ This actually was the initial plan for my own thesis, but a more in-depth examination of towns in the post-statehood era would be necessary to successfully explore this area and I simply did not have the time to do so.

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