

CSWS Research Matters

Why Oklahoma?

All-Black Towns and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Indian Territory

BY MELISSA N. STUCKEY, Assistant Professor, University of Oregon Department of History



For many people it comes as a surprise to learn that dozens of all-black towns were established in Oklahoma during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two of the most frequent questions that I receive when relaying this fact are: “Why all-black towns?” and “Why Oklahoma?” My response to these questions tends to begin with an understanding nod and smile. Indeed, it was my own very similar set of questions that drew me to the study of Oklahoma’s black towns more than ten years ago.

My forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Race, Rights, and Power: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Boley, Oklahoma*, sheds new light on the history of all-black towns in Oklahoma through the story of Boley, the largest all-black town in the United States. Boley was one of over a dozen black towns founded in Indian Territory (the eastern half of the current state of Oklahoma). The towns attracted thousands of African Americans seeking to escape the racism and violence that dominated the American landscape during the Jim Crow era, and to live their lives independent of white surveillance and control. As one settler explained: In Boley, “nobody came in and tried to tell them what they could do and what they couldn’t do.”

For many migrants, however, these towns represented more than an escape from the daily traumas of living in a society dominated by the doctrine of white supremacy. Combining the ideology of black nationalism with the reform spirit that characterized the Progressive Era, these settlers believed that black towns could be stages upon which African Americans

demonstrated their capacity to operate as full and equal members of American society. Another Boley settler expressed exactly this sentiment in his newspaper, the *Boley Progress*, when he urged other black Southerners to “come and help prove to the caucasian [sic] race and not only the caucasian race but the world, that the Negro is a law-making and law-abiding citizen, and help solve the great racial problem that is now before us.” In the years immediately before and after Oklahoma statehood in 1907, there seemed to be reason for Boley’s settlers to feel optimistic about their prospects in combating racism simply through the success of their town-building endeavor. With unvarnished enthusiasm Boleyites established homes, businesses, schools and churches; they also actively participated in local and county politics. So impressive were their achievements in a short period of time that visitors of all races expressed astonishment and delight over the rapidly growing black town and its peaceful and prosperous citizenry.

Women and men were equally attracted to Boley and other black towns, but gender specific reasons often played a role in their decisions to move to them. In these towns black women and girls could aspire to careers outside of the domestic work that was their primary lot in most other parts of the United States. In Boley, black women held a variety of jobs. They taught in the local public and private schools; they worked in the retail establishments that lined Main Street; they ran boarding houses and other small businesses. A black woman even operated the post office during the town’s early years. An important benefit of having these new work opportunities was that it removed black women and girls from prolonged direct contact and supervision with white male employers. The ability to absent themselves from working in white people’s homes mattered a great deal because in the larger American society, black women and girls were especially vulnerable to sexual assault by white men, men who acted with almost complete confidence that they would never be held responsible for their crimes. The links between expanded work opportunities and increased protection from sexual violence shows how the rhetoric of “freedom,” so often used by settlers to describe the Boley experience, took on a special meaning for women.

Freed from the day-to-day burdens of the toxic combination of racism and sexism that partially shaped their existence outside of black towns, black women in Boley enthusiastically worked to put their mark on the town. They established



The turn-of-the-century residence of African American settler E.L. LeGrand (photo courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society).

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numerous clubs, some of which took on religious and charitable work, but others which focused on intellectual and cultural refinement. In 1906, for example, one Boley woman delivered a paper before the Boley Ladies Club. Her subject was the girls of Boley. She said in part, "God bless the girls and hasten the time when in Boley we may have a Phillis Wh[eatley]. . . . Let our young ladies be the life of Boley." This heartfelt wish of a Boley woman, that she and her peers nurture the girls of their town and imagine that among these girls could be a poet whose name, like Wheatley's, would be forever remembered by black people, spoke volumes about the ways that black towns expanded rather than contracted the horizons of their inhabitants.

It should, perhaps, come as no surprise that Oklahoma became home to Boley and so many other all-black towns. Prior to Oklahoma statehood in 1907, the land belonged to several Indian nations, including the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole nations, also known as the Five Civilized Tribes. These five nations had been forcibly moved into Indian Territory by the U.S. government from their homelands in what is the present day U.S. South. They brought with them an estimated 4,500 African-descended slaves. By 1860, this group of enslaved people encompassed between 10 and 18 percent of the population of the Five Tribes. During the Civil War, the Five Tribes officially allied with the Confederacy and as a result were required to negotiate new treaties with the U.S. government during Reconstruction. These treaties formally freed the slaves of each nation and required that these former slaves, known as freedmen, be made citizens of the Indian nations that had held them in bondage. The tribes were also forced to cede the western parts of their territory, out of which the U.S. government created Oklahoma Territory.

As a result of these actions, Indian Territory freedmen had access to lands held in common by all citizens of their various nations. Further, in the late nineteenth century when the U.S. government began the process of forcing the Indian nations to relinquish their sovereignty, freedmen were granted titles to parcels of land in the nations on the basis of their citizenship. Although their land allotments were significantly smaller than those made to tribal citizens deemed to be of Indian descent (the Indian ancestry of some freedmen was officially ignored, just as the European ancestry of some former slaves in the United States was officially ignored), the freedmen of Indian Territory were still the only group of former slaves in North America granted land after the Civil War. Organized land runs in Oklahoma Territory and the hope of purchasing unallotted land in Indian Territory drew large numbers of white and black migrants to both territories, but black Southerners were especially attracted to Indian Territory, especially those areas that were heavily populated by freedmen. Although some freedmen believed that African-American migrants brought with them the strictures of Jim Crow and therefore resented their presence, others, like those freedmen upon whose land Boley was founded, welcomed these black migrants and joined with them in creating Oklahoma's African-American population.

Unfortunately, white supremacist beliefs are rarely overcome through proof of their fallaciousness alone, and turn-of-the-century Oklahoma was no exception to this rule. If anything, the success of



U.S. Post Office, Boley, circa 1915. The woman nearest the center is Mrs. Lula E. Simmons, assistant postmaster and wife of the postmaster. The other women are also postal employees (photo courtesy of the Oklahoma State Archives).

towns like Boley and the presence of property-owning and politically active black people posed a threat to the secure establishment of white supremacy in Oklahoma. A white newspaper editor from a town near Boley expressed these racialized fears, writing that politically active black people threatened to turn their county into the "little Africa of Oklahoma." In response to this perceived threat, the new state's white majority zealously protected their race privilege and sought to stem further black African-American settlement through the passage of a series of discriminatory statutes. First, the state constitution provided definitions of whiteness and blackness;

segregated all schools on the basis of these racial categorizations; and denied women the right to vote in order to deny black women access to the ballot. Shortly afterwards, the first law passed by the first state legislature segregated railroad coaches and waiting rooms throughout the state. This law was an especially bitter pill to the residents of black towns who were forced to watch partitions built to keep them out of portions of the railroad depot in their own towns. Finally, in 1910 a majority of white Oklahomans voted to disfranchise their black neighbors with a constitutional amendment known as the "grandfather clause," which mandated that all persons whose ancestors could not legally vote prior to 1865 take and pass a literacy test prior to voting. Thus, within a brief span of years, the freedom and opportunities black people believed to be accessible to them in Oklahoma were moved out of reach.

Instead of quietly fading into obscurity, however, the people of Boley ignited the fight for voting rights in Oklahoma. Boley and its leadership figured prominently in all aspects in the voting rights struggle in Oklahoma until the 1930s, from the town's citizens staging early confrontations with neighboring whites determined to disfranchise them, to hosting blacks from all over the state as they organized statewide efforts to combat disfranchisement. Prior to World War II this level of grassroots political organizing was virtually unheard of among disfranchised African Americans in southern states. The legacy of this organizing included two landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions, in 1915 and 1939, both of which overturned racist election laws in the state. In addition, activism in Boley enabled the fledgling National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to claim its first victory in that 1915 voting rights case, and also to gain a foothold in the South when most other southern states were hostile, if not dangerous, spaces for NAACP organizers and members. Unfortunately, Boley's decline in prominence during the Great Depression has been accompanied by a loss of knowledge of the town's important role in the history of African-American activism. It is my hope that my work on Boley will introduce this important history to a wider audience. ■

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