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LEGEND, LORE & LEGACY

Freed But Not Free

Freedmen settlements founded after the Civil War gave African-Americans in Texas a taste of independence.

By Elaine Robbins

St. John Colony, 10 miles northeast of Lockhart, doesn't appear on highway maps. In fact, if you didn't know what you were looking for, you'd cruise right past this quiet hamlet, marked only by a few scattered houses and two Baptist churches set amid the rolling pasture and post oaks.

But on Sunday mornings, when worshippers gather at St. John Regular Baptist Church and lift their voices in praise, the community seems to spring to life. There's Clayton Hemphill, 65, his brother Andrew Hill, 73, and sisters Colean Demps, 68, and Luruce Tennon, 70. These siblings are descendants of John Winn, a freed slave and preacher, who in 1872 led a wagon train of freed slaves to settle in this remote spot on the Bastrop-Caldwell County border. "We was poor people," says Hemphill. "We had a hard time. But the Lord blessed us."

St. John Colony is one of more than 400 freedmen settlements established in Texas in the decades after the Civil War. For freed slaves in Texas in the wake of the Civil War, the jubilation of Emancipation was short-lived. Turned loose in the Jim Crow-era South without assets or credit, they struggled to survive amid discrimination and the constant threat of violence. Most fled to find jobs and opportunities in the North. Those who stayed became sharecroppers. Crowded into dingy one-room shacks in situations some likened to slavery, they became trapped in a cycle of perpetual debt. Others worked for white farmers, in some cases their former owners.

BY CARVING OUT AN EXISTENCE OUTSIDE OF AN OPPRESSIVE SOCIETY, THE FREEDMEN LEFT A SHINING LEGACY OF PRIDE AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY FOR THEIR DESCENDANTS.

But a significant minority made a different life for themselves. For many people emerging from the trauma of slavery, owning land embodied the idea of freedom. And impressively, against huge odds, in the decades that followed the Civil War, many freed slaves achieved that dream. In 1870, just 839 blacks owned farms in Texas. By 1890, that number had soared to 12,513.

Some settled in segregated quarters on the edge of white cities, where resistance to black land ownership was less fierce than in rural areas. Places like Dallas' Deep Ellum and Houston's Fifth Ward, which produced such jazz and blues musicians as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins and Arnett Cobb, started as freedmen's towns. The Austin area had more than a dozen of these enclaves; the tony, historic Clarksville neighborhood is the only one that has survived. Residents of these urban enclaves could walk to jobs in the city as maids and laundresses, barbers and railroad men, carpenters and laborers.

But others managed to buy or squat on land in the eastern half of Texas — land that whites considered too remote or prone to flooding. "Most land in freedmen's settlements was unplatted and unincorporated," says Thad Sitton, co-author with James H. Conrad of the book *Freedom Colonies: Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow* (University of Texas Press, 2005). "They were established in creek and river bottoms and along county lines, on wilderness or neglected land, land that was never devoted to cotton farming." There, they built their own churches and schools and planted crops. In these rural freedmen settlements, they intentionally lived under the radar of mainstream soci-

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ety. By carving out an existence outside of an oppressive society, they left a shining legacy of pride and self-sufficiency for their descendants.

"Most of these communities went unnoticed by their contemporaries," says Sitton. "They were communities of avoidance and self-segregation where residents adapted to Jim Crow not by moving north but by keeping to themselves. They did as little business as they could at the county courthouse."

In these settlements, with names like Bethlehem, Mount Olive, Pleasant Grove and Sand Hill, residents lived off the land. They grew peas and sweet potatoes and raised chickens, hogs and wild turkeys. They set out lines for fish and hunted. "Animal trapping seemed a black specialty," wrote Sitton and Conrad. Young men trapped bobwhite quail and white-tailed deer and caught opossums and rabbits in sacks. Cotton was often grown for extra cash.

Although they scraped together little more than a subsistence living, they offered their children a rich inheritance: a sense of self-worth and self-reliance. This legacy first became clear to Lareatha Clay, an African-American and former commissioner of the Texas Historical Commission, when she interviewed her father and mother about their different childhood experiences.

"My father came from a sharecropping family in Louisiana," she says. "He talked about how they had to work for this person, how mean people were, how the school for black kids only went to the fifth grade." But in Shankleville, the freedmen settlement near Houston where her mother grew up, "they would talk about how they would start churches and start schools and pool their money to buy land. It wasn't like, 'We don't have any control over that.' It was a real community. That was the first time it hit me how different their views of growing up were."

By the 1940s and '50s, many of these communities fell into decline or disappeared altogether. During the Depression and World War II, many residents found jobs elsewhere and never returned. Others lost their land through fragmentation among many descendants or through legal trickery.

A few, however, had an unlikely comeback. In 1978 Winnie Martha Moyer, 63, moved back to Antioch, a nearly abandoned community less then a mile outside Buda along Old Black Colony Road. "Today six sisters, one brother, one great-granddaughter and four grandnephews and grandnieces live in eight mobile homes on 10 1/2 acres left behind when the family moved to Arizona in 1955," chronicled Robert Gee in the *Austin American-Statesman* in 2000.

Many freedmen settlements may be gone, but they are not forgotten. At annual reunions, many held on Juneteenth, descendants return from across the country for a day of churchgoing, picnicking and reminiscing.

By all accounts, it's a legacy worth preserving. Clay, who a few years ago got her mother and then herself admitted as the first African-Americans in the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, understands the importance of this proud heritage. "As people in the older generation die off," she says, "we want the kids to continue to have the feeling that it can be done — that you can overcome odds." ✯