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The Triumph and Tragedy of North Dallas/Freedmantown

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A New Beginning

North Dallas/Freedmantown

By Marsha Prior, Ph. D.

When Major General Gordon Granger landed in Galveston on June 19, 1865, to publicly read the Emancipation Proclamation, it spurred newly freed African Americans (referred to as freedmen) to relocate throughout the state. Many established communities outside of towns, seeking safety in numbers and benefitting from more employment opportunities.

One colony that arose near Dallas grew to become the heart and soul of Black Dallas and thrived for nearly 80 years. Initially referred to as Freedmantown, this community was established in 1869 when freed Blacks began buying one-acre plots of land located two-to-three miles north of downtown Dallas from a White landowner. That same year, an African American named Sam Eakins purchased an acre of land to establish a cemetery—an act that suggests the area was intended to be a permanent home. Faced with segregation and racial violence, residents promptly established their own churches, schools, shops, and social fraternities, which further encouraged a sense of community and provided the necessary skills for survival and success.

THE COMING OF THE RAILROADS

Freedmantown might have remained a small burg outside of Dallas had it not been for the arrival of two railroad lines, the south-north Houston and Texas Central (H & T C) in 1872 and the east-west Texas & Pacific (T & P) one year later. The two railroads crossed each other a mile south of Freedmantown, creating a busy intersection with two depots. With people, goods, services, and jobs all coming together, Freedmantown quickly grew, prompting one Dallas newspaper to report in 1873 that more than 500 African Americans were living there.

Churches were among the earliest institutions established, and in addition to providing religious services, pastors took it upon themselves to hold educational classes for both adults and children. Having been denied a formal education while enslaved, freedmen valued any means to expand their knowledge, but schools were segregated, and funds for Black schools were limited. The Reverend Henry Swann held an educational day school at St. Paul Methodist Episcopal (M. E.). Reverend Allen R. Griggs of New Hope Baptist established a grammar school around 1875, with a curriculum that included reading, arithmetic, writing, geography, singing, and Bible studies. Nevertheless, formal education remained an aspirational goal.

By the 1890s, Freedmantown had four publicly funded schools, but classes still were held in churches or fraternal organizations. When bricks, a sturdier, more modern building material, were used in the construction of White schools, Freedmantown residents lobbied hard for their own brick school. Reverend Allen Griggs, now the former minister of New Hope Baptist Church, and F. K. Chase, a local African American lawyer, led a petition drive that succeeded in getting the city council and school board to agree to erect a similar structure in Freedmantown. The stately center of learning (now demolished) was the pride of the neighborhood. While the school was originally designed for elementary grades, after the building's completion, residents went back to the school board to ask that it also provide education for upper grades. The request was granted, and from thereon, the eventually named B. F. Darrell School offered classes for primary and upper-level students until 1922 when Booker T. Washington High School was constructed in the neighborhood.

Early city directories listed the occupation of residents, providing a glimpse into employment opportunities. Those living in Freedmantown worked as teamsters, laborers, carpenters, servants, brickmakers, plasterers, blacksmiths, farmers, *wood sawyers* (one who saws wood for a living and usually sells it from their yard), barbers, porters, *draymen* (drivers of flatbed wagons), and laundresses. Several businesses also had emerged. Dock Rowen ran a successful grocery store, dealt in wood and coal, and sold real estate. An astute businessman, he eventually built a 13-room

Opposite page, top: The easily traversable railroad tracks that helped Freedmantown prosper are surrounded by automobiles and commercial establishments in this historic image. **Opposite page, below:** The removal of those tracks for the construction of the Central Expressway in the 1940s split the African American community in two and signaled the demise of the neighborhood. Both photographs are courtesy of the Dallas Public Library.

Victorian house. His adult daughter, Leoma Rowen, owned a millinery shop. She advertised her business in the city directory, informing customers that she made and redressed hats in the "latest styles."

By the end of the 19th century, Dallas had expanded north to surround Freedmantown, which then became known as North Dallas. Now, with a new name, the community was well on its way to becoming the heart and soul of Black Dallas. Fire insurance maps show the enclave to be populated with residences of varying sizes and shapes. Some lived in narrow shotgun houses while others occupied more spacious homes. The diversity in dwellings points to a wide range in earning power. Though some were simply getting by, overall, the community was growing in prosperity. By all accounts, North Dallas was *the* place to live if you were African American.

MORE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Crossing into the 20th century, North Dallas continued to thrive and became a city within a city. Certain individuals, mostly preachers, doctors, dentists, teachers, and school principals, rose to great heights and were well respected by their neighbors, even gaining the admiration of some of the White citizens of Dallas. Marcellus Cooper saved money from his job at Sanger Brothers department store to attend dental school. A bright, earnest individual, Cooper was accepted into Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. Upon graduation, he returned to North Dallas, becoming the first African American dentist in Texas. Another person breaking racial barriers was Ollie Louise Bryan (nee Bryant), the first female graduate in dentistry at Meharry. Bryan completed her education in 1902 and, by 1906, was residing in North Dallas where she practiced for the next 10 years.

The neighborhood did not lack for medical doctors either. Dr. Benjamin Bluitt, another alumni of Meharry, ran a sanitarium in nearby Deep Ellum. He was heavily involved in civic affairs and contributed to the North Dallas community. He was a trustee for the St. James African American Methodist Episcopal Temple, a member of the Colored Knights of Pythias for which he was master of ceremonies at their 1906 state convention, served as presi-

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dent of the Lone Star State Medical Association that same year, and joined the Dallas Chapter of the National Negro Business League. Following in Bluitt's footsteps, Dr. William McMillan established a practice in a two-story brick building in 1923 and recruited doctors outside of the city to join him. Those he persuaded included Drs. L. G. Pinkston, W. K. Flowers, and William Green, all of whom became respected members of the medical field.

As in the past, church ministers continued their efforts to promote the advancement of North Dallas residents. At New Hope Baptist Church, Dr. Alexander Stephens Jackson, serving from 1899 to 1936, was an outspoken proponent of uplifting fellow members and neighbors. He formed a group called the Patron's League that invited prominent thinkers to North Dallas. As a result, the community heard from important figures, including Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Dubois, and Mary Church Terrell (women's suffragist and anti-lynching crusader), among others.

Dallas African Americans could also stay informed with the *Dallas Express*, a newspaper founded by William Elisha King. Concerned that White-owned publications rarely covered events in Dallas' African American communities, King began producing his paper in 1892. Residents found information there on community events, people, civic affairs, businesses, sports, and activities, as well as state and national news. The *Dallas Express* remained in publication until 1970, long after King's death.

CRACKS BEGIN TO EMERGE

Fifty-plus years after its beginning, North Dallas had reached its peak and was showing signs of wear. Few streets were paved, sanitary conditions were worrisome, and the neighborhood was overcrowded. Nevertheless, it still was a thriving, self-sufficient enclave with a theater, dress shops, beauty salons, men's store, barber shops, taxi service, hotel, funeral home, social and literary clubs, YMCA, YWCA, photography studio, Carnegie library, a park, trade and public

Opposite page, top: The B. F. Darrell School served both elementary and upper level-students in North Dallas/Freedmantown until 1922. Photograph courtesy of the Dallas Historical Society. **Opposite page, bottom:** Dr. William McMillan established his medical practice in 1923. Note the railroad tracks in the foreground of the image. Photograph courtesy of DeGolyer Library, SMU, George W. Cook Dallas/Texas Image Collection. **This page:** Musical performances such as this one offered cultural opportunities to African Americans. Photograph in the public domain via the Portal to Texas History. From the *Dallas Express*, March 8, 1919.

AN ARCHITECT WITH A VOICE

William Sydney Pittman (1875-1958) was a nationally renowned architect who arrived in North Dallas/Freedmantown with his wife Portia (daughter of Booker T. Washington) in 1912. With that move, he became Texas' first practicing Black architect. Already known for his work in Washington, D.C., Virginia, Maryland, and Alabama, Pittman gained commissions in several Texas cities. In Dallas, he designed the St. James A. M. E. Church and the Knights of Pythias building. Both are located near the former North Dallas/Freedmantown enclave and still stand as city landmarks. The St. James A. M. E. Church is a Neoclassical three-story structure faced with yellow brick. The four-story red brick Knights of Pythias building is built in the Beaux-Arts style and served as offices for North Dallas' first-rate doctors, dentists, lawyers, and other professionals.

Pittman was a controversial figure, unafraid to speak his mind. He believed strongly in hiring only African American contractors, laborers, electricians, and tradespeople for his buildings. Though this was a noble gesture, he made enemies among Dallas' Black leaders, accusing them of soliciting the favor of Whites at the expense of their own. In 1928, Pittman quit practicing architecture and devoted his time to publishing a newspaper called *The Brotherhood Eyes*. He used the publication to rail against the African American community, specifically calling out Black ministers as immoral hypocrites. He was sentenced to Leavenworth Penitentiary in 1937 for sending obscene material (his newspaper) through the U. S. mail. When released two years later, he returned to Dallas, living a quiet, but impoverished life, until his death. ■

Above: Photograph in the public domain.

schools, churches, and a wide variety of mom-and-pop business establishments.

Even with these successes, North Dallas was not without its trials. Segregation and racial violence were always at the front door, intimidating and threatening residents. The *Dallas Express* ran articles on violent acts committed against African Americans. The State Fair of Texas sponsored "Klan Day" in 1923 where 5,000 new members were initiated into the Ku Klux Klan, an event that surely worried the Black population.

Despite this racism and segregation, the city of Dallas would not have developed as it did if not for the African American citizens. Though limited in job opportunities, they contributed to the construction of buildings and infrastructure, helped run the railroads, and served in various capacities to ensure the success of the city's downtown hotels, stores, businesses, and restaurants. They maintained the houses and yards of upper-class Whites and provided childcare. Dallas owed a huge debt to the African American community.

THE DEMISE OF NORTH DALLAS/FREEDMANTOWN

In fewer than 20 years, North Dallas suffered two devastating blows that would foretell its fall. First was the removal of the H & T C railroad tracks in the 1940s to construct U. S. Highway 75 (known as Central Expressway). The tracks had always split the community in two, but they were easy to traverse by foot, car, or bicycle, and never imposed a physical barrier between the east and west sides of North Dallas. A six-lane highway of speeding vehicles, however, was a different matter. Suddenly, east-west residents could no longer cross to the other side of their neighborhood to access churches, businesses, friends, or family, and residents shuddered to think of their children navigating a busy highway to get to and from school.

The second blow came in 1962 when land in the southern sector of North Dallas was obtained for the construction of another massive road project, Woodall Rodgers Freeway. Homes, businesses, and the beloved Dunbar Library were demolished, and residents found themselves cut off from downtown. As their neighborhood changed, many relocated to areas that were more attainable for African Americans, though not necessarily welcoming. In fact, several families that moved south of downtown had their front porches bombed.

Today, one is hard-pressed to find vestiges of the once-thriving North Dallas/Freedmantown community. Only a handful of the nicer homes remain. Gone are most of the residences, large and small, the shops, churches, schools, and businesses. Also absent are the descendants of the hard-working men and women who did all they could for the betterment of society. Now the area is known as Uptown, a stylish neighborhood with high-rise apartments and all the amenities attractive to young, successful urbanites. ★

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Top, from left to right: A large crowd waits patiently to register and vote at the Moorland YMCA in North Dallas. When built in 1930, this YMCA was one of only a few such facilities for African Americans in the Southwest. **Middle:** Crowds of patrons gathered in 1931 for the opening of the Paul Laurence Dunbar Library, named for a distinguished African American writer. The building was demolished when the Woodall Rodgers Freeway was constructed. Both photographs are courtesy of the Dallas Public Library. **Right:** Few residents of today's Uptown area know about the historic origins of their stylish neighborhood, now filled with high rises and modern residences. Photograph courtesy of Alan Robertson. Original in color.

A Testament to the Past

Freedman's Cemetery started as a one-acre plot in 1869, but it soon was apparent that the space was hardly sufficient for a growing community. To address the problem, three adjacent acres were purchased 10 years later. Despite this effort, there were signs that this would be only a temporary solution as space filled up quickly. When a new burial ground for African Americans was established in 1902, Black community leaders petitioned to have Freedman's Cemetery closed. The city found just cause for the request, citing overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, and in 1907, burials there ceased.

Although Freedman's Cemetery was impacted by various road projects, the greatest damage stemmed from the 1946 construction of Central Expressway on the site's east side. During the grading process, burial markers, including headstones, wooden slabs or crosses, and traditional African markers, such as shells and broken plates, were scraped away before graves were covered with pavement.

In 1965, the City of Dallas acquired what remained of the cemetery and established it as a memorial park. The grounds were swept clean, infilled with dirt, and playground equipment erected. A granite marker, declaring the memorial park to be a "public cemetery," was the only clue as to the area's earlier purpose. That is until the 1980s, when Central Expressway needed widening. Discovering that such an operation would destroy hundreds of unmarked burials, the state transportation department, in cooperation with descendants and interested parties, agreed to exhume the remains in the new pathway and reinter them in an adjacent plot of land. Sitting just south of the original burial ground, the Freedman's Memorial Cemetery, with its stately bronze sculptures, stands as a monument to the triumph and tragedy of formally enslaved African Americans and their descendants. ■

Left: Bronze statues stand at the Freedman's Memorial Cemetery entrance. Photograph courtesy of Alan Robertson. Original in color.