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This article is an adaptation of the first chapter of a book in progress by Melissa Stuckey on the history of Boley, Oklahoma.

Say have you heard the story
   Of the little Colored town;
Way over in the Nation
   On such lovely sloping ground?
With as pretty little houses
   As you ever chanced to meet,
With not a thing but Colored folks
   A standing on the streets?
O ’tis a pretty country
   And the Negroes own it too;
With not a single white man here
   To tell us what to do—
   In Boley.
Between 1890 and 1907, more than twenty thousand African Americans emigrated from the Southern United States to Creek Nation, Indian Territory (a sovereign Indian nation located within what is today the state of Oklahoma). Most of these emigrants came from former slaveholding states like Arkansas, Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Louisiana. In these states, African-American people continued to experience oppression from white supremacist power structures and private citizens alike. They were subjected to discriminatory laws; unmitigated violence and intimidation; and systemic roadblocks to educational and economic opportunities well into the twentieth century.

Prior to 1865, the Creek Nation also practiced slavery. It also officially allied with the Confederacy during the Civil War. After the war, the Creek Nation adopted its former slaves as full citizens. As citizens, not of the United States, but rather of the Creek Nation, these African-descended people enjoyed freedom of movement, voting rights, political representation, and access to land. Indeed by the early 1900s, Creek Freedmen, collectively owned hundreds of thousands of acres of land and often formed informal settlements and communities on their shared acreage. The contrasting circumstances between African-descended people in the U.S. South and in the Creek Nation led many African-American settlers to view their immigration to the Creek Nation as an escape from persistent subjugation in the South to a place where they could enjoy “true freedom.”

For many African Americans who moved to the Creek Nation freedom meant the ability to live peacefully, to occupy the public sphere without fear of attack, and to work, learn, love, play, pray, and vote without interference or restriction. Many of these emigrants also believed that such freedom could only be possible in African-American created and controlled spaces. For this reason, between 1891 and 1907, African-American settlers created nearly two dozen all-black towns in the Creek Nation and many more in other parts of Indian Territory and neighboring Oklahoma Territory. Among these towns, Boley—memorialized by Boley settler E. J. Pinkett in the poem “Over in Boley,” whose first stanza opens this essay—grew to be the largest and best-known black town in the United States. It, along with the twelve other surviving historic black towns in modern-day Oklahoma, serves as a continuing testament to the courage, ambitions, hopes, and dreams of a people who were both one-generation removed from slavery and also the forebears of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Boley officially opened for settlement on September 25, 1903. Its founders included a Texas expat named Thomas Haynes, land owning Creek Freedmen like James Barnett and progressive white men like railroad manager J. B. Boley, for whom the town was named. Boley’s downtown was established on land owned by Barnett’s young daughter Abigail and J. B. Boley helped the townspeople secure the support from the Fort Smith and Western railroad. A traditional element of Boley’s founding story, as recalled by Boley residents in the late 1920s, is that a coin flip determined whether the town would be named after Barnett or after Boley. Surviving evidence from 1903 suggests the town was initially named Barnett, but soon renamed Boley. There is no extant evidence of the rationale behind this change. Nonetheless, there was a good deal of wisdom in town leaders strategically paying tribute to a supportive white man who could assist them in acquiring crucial railroad access. The presence of the railway, which ran from Fort Smith, Arkansas to Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory and intersected the fledgling black town, gave it a competitive advantage over black- and white-run towns with no direct railroad access.

Early town leaders worked hard to realize their vision of freedom in Boley. They had the town incorporated, established a local government and held elections. They opened a public school, established churches, formed clubs and participated in fraternal and benevolent activities. They gathered together for social events, weddings, and funerals. And they worked hard to entice other black people to join them in growing the town and solidifying its promise and potential. Haynes and other “Boley boosters” traveled extensively throughout the South and the Territories to tell other African Americans about the town. They also recruited
printer O. H. Bradley to establish a newspaper from which they could spread the news about Boley. Bradley named the weekly The Boley Progress and, quoting a phrase often used by Theodore Roosevelt, gave it the motto: “All Men Up, Not Some Down.” Through a network of agents scattered across the South and Midwest, the Progress spread the story of Boley far and wide and encouraged black men and women from all over the United States to move to Boley.

THE BOLEY CARNIVAL

One of the most spectacular recruitment efforts of Boley’s boosters was a 1905 festival dubbed the Boley Carnival. Set to open on Juneteenth, the Boley Carnival was a weeklong celebration of black freedom and a preview to attendees of the quality of freedom they too could enjoy in Boley.

Juneteenth is a uniquely African-American holiday. It commemorates June 19, 1865. On this day, in Galveston, Texas, Union Army General Gordon Granger publicly read Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and declared to all Texans, black and white, that slavery was no longer the law of the land. This act took place a full two months after the South formally surrendered in Appomattox Court House, Virginia on April 9, 1865. Although Juneteenth celebrations originated in Texas, they have spread, first regionally and then nationally, as black Texans like Thomas Haynes and others who peopled Boley, moved further North and West and continued the tradition in their new communities. Juneteenth festivities in Indian Territory were particularly meaningful. The date not only represented freedom to African-American settlers, it also commemorated June 19, 1862, the day the United States Congress declared slavery illegal in its western territories. Further, many Indian Territory slaves were evacuated to Texas by owners seeking to safeguard their property. They and their brethren remaining in Indian Territory also did not learn of the freedom until late June 1865.

Boley’s citizenry worked hard to attract potential home seekers to their carnival and freedom festival. They advertised it to African Americans in Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Missouri, Kansas, and other parts of the Territories and, on their behalf, secured discounted fares from the Fort Smith and Western Railroad. As a result of their efforts, during the carnival Boley’s population surged from its typical 600 to 3,000 on any given day and approximately 5,000 people, black, white, and Indian visited Boley during carnival week.

Visitors in need of food and rest were accommodated in a variety of ways. Hungry crowds packed local eateries like the Morning Star Restaurant and the Jones and Trimble Café. They also thronged the food stalls that lined the streets to purchase barbecue, watermelon, lemonade, candy, and other treats. Overnight guests booked rooms in Boley’s small hotel or in local boarding houses. A fair number enjoyed the hospitality of family members or acquaintances that lived in Boley. Still others camped out in their wagon beds. The need for visitor quarters remained urgent, however, and the Fort Smith and Western Railroad helped to fill it by rolling in extra coaches from Arkansas. These railroad cars were side tracked and used as private rooms and bunks for paying guests.

Each day people and vehicles, from rickety ox carts to fine carriages, crowded the streets. They came to see the town, meet its people, and to observe for themselves the freedom and opportunity it might offer them. They observed and patronized the bustling businesses that lined Boley’s downtown streets. They admired the homes, churches, and the public school that anchored the community. They marveled at the miles of surrounding farmland, owned almost entirely by black people. For the many who were interested in moving to Boley, town site agent Thomas Haynes set up a bureau of information in the post office building. He and his crew of real estate agents were kept busy answering questions about available employment and small business opportunities and also showing and leasing farm and town lots throughout the week.

Boley’s townspeople also arranged many attractions to entertain their guests. They contracted merry-go-round operators Hanley and Fox, who delighted adults and balloon-carrying children alike with rides on their steam-powered device. Visitors were also treated to a baseball tournament, a special “Indian ball game”

Photo courtesy of the Research Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society
between local Creek and Seminole Indians, and rodeo events like mule racing, bronco busting, and roping contests. A band from Okmulgee, Indian Territory arrived on June 20. Band members disembarked from their train car playing “Sherman’s March through Georgia,” a celebratory Civil War tune known by all who heard it. The following evening, they performed at an entertainment that also featured a young people's recitation contest.

Thursday, June 22 was the big program day. Invited speakers arrived on the afternoon train. Carnival attendees greeted them at the depot and the band welcomed them with tune. With the band leading the way, everyone paraded from the train to the fair grounds for the afternoon's program. After enjoying more band music, they bowed their heads in prayer. Then, master of ceremonies O. H. Bradley offered a welcoming address and introduced the day's speakers. Among these honored guests were E. O. Trent, a Fort Smith newspaper editor and principal of the Howard School, the first African-American high school in that city; and African-American attorneys E. P. Blakemore and M. W. Guy. In his address, attorney Guy spoke forcefully on “the value of Negro colonization.” He urged black audience members to accumulate and save wealth, to invest in black-owned business and banking enterprises, and to always uphold their already established principles related to religion, education, industry, and morality—pillars upon which Boley was founded.

Other program highlights included a letter read on behalf of Inman E. Page, head of Langston Institute, the African-American college established in Langston, Oklahoma Territory and a speech delivered on behalf of Booker T. Washington. This speech, delivered by William M. McCain, a 1905 graduate of Tuskegee, Washington's Alabama institution of higher education for African Americans, emphasized the importance of the “Negro press” and urged attendees to support African-American publications. After the program ended, the young man was surrounded by people eager to shake hands with “one of Washington's boys.”

Over the next few days, the other carnival attendees also filtered out of town. Most of those who left expressed surprise and delight about all they had seen and learned about Boley. Dazzled by all they saw and experienced, many of these visitors also carried with them signed property deeds or leases. These humble contracts signified their commitment to gather up their families and belongings, part with their old lives, and begin anew in Boley. They were a vanguard and, over the years, were followed by thousands more. As a result, between 1905 and 1910, Boley's urban population more than doubled growing from approximately 600 to over 1,300. By 1910 another 2,500 black people also lived in the farming districts that surrounded the town. Together this group of intrepid settlers and Freedmen; men, women, and children; farmers and merchants; teachers, doctors, lawyers, laborers and craftsmen created a utopian society grounded on freedom and equal opportunity. Collectively they carried themselves with a kind of pride and confidence that set them apart from black people bowed under the weight of Jim Crow.

In the ensuing decades Boley and its people faced tremendous challenges. Oklahoma entered the Union in 1907 as a Jim Crow state. State legislators passed a myriad of segregation laws and disenfranchised black Oklahomans in 1910. In the face of these setbacks, black people from across the state flocked to Boley to organize in defense of their rights in a space where they were safe from harassment and discrimination. Their efforts led to the rapid expansion of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Oklahoma, the overturning of disenfranchisement laws, and the development of an Oklahoma civil rights agenda that centered desegregation. This new direction in the long struggle for civil rights decentered black towns as antidotes for the racism experienced by African Americans. This change, coupled with World War- and Great Depression-related migration; the decline of the yeoman farmer and small town merchant; and the rise of the corporation, devastated Boley's population and economy. Those who remain recall with pride the dreams of their ancestors, and they keep their legacy of hope and courage alive.
Oklahoma’s
African American
Festivals and Events

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**MAY**

*Cowboys of Color Rodeo*
Oklahoma City, OK

*Boley Rodeo & BBQ Festival*
Boley, OK

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**JUNE**

*All-Black Towns Bus Tour*
Rudisill Regional Library
Tulsa, OK

*All-Black Towns Bus Tour*
Oklahoma State University

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**JULY**

*Bass Reeves Legacy Day & Western History Conference*
Three Rivers Museum

*Okmulgee Invitational Rodeo & Festival*
Creek Nation Omniplex Arena

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**AUGUST**

*Black Rodeo Weekend*
Clearview, Oklahoma

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**SEPTEMBER**

*Dusk ‘Til Dawn Blues Festival*
Oklahoma Blues Hall of Fame

*Historic Black Town Honors Gala*
Oklahoma History Center
Oklahoma City, OK

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**OCTOBER**

*Grayson Gumbo Festival*
Grayson, OK
More in Issue 05

Muddy Logic    Elizabeth Prentice
If whisky is for drinking and water for fighting, what rules our passion on the Missouri River?

The Minor God of Iowa   Patrick Mainelli
In 1853, dozens of people followed a spiritual leader’s bidding to Iowa. Did they get duped?

A World of Their Own   Conor and Emalie Cockrell
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