African American Communities and Municipalities in Antebellum and Pre-Civil Rights Movement America

Section I.

Introduction

In the textbooks most children study, African American history appears to have a gap between the end of slavery in the 1860’s and the civil rights movement in the 1960’s. Apart from short mentioning as victims of horrific mob violence, African Americans are nearly entirely omitted from a hundred years of American history. Even when additional resources are sought out by students or teachers, they frequently imply a sense of white-dependence and helplessness on the part of African Americans. Any advancements or achievements noted typically include a benevolent white organization or individual, without whom the accomplishment would have been impossible, or so the literature seems to imply.

The intention of this unit is to highlight the self-autonomy and efficacy of the African American population following emancipation. Through the exploration of six black communities and municipalities students will begin to see the African American’s true role in American history. As Victor Roman stated, “…A knowledge of the present is absolutely essential to any intelligent anticipation of future events, and it is impossible to comprehend thoroughly the present without a knowledge of the past” (pg. 21). This unit will provide African American students with a sense of historical pride, while simultaneously educating both black and white students on the power and independence of the black community even before the civil rights movement.
The six communities to be examined are: Nicodemus, KS, Princeville, NC, Eatonville, FL, Hobson City, AL, Tulsa, OK, the Greenwood District, and Atlanta, GA, the Sweet Auburn District. Each of these communities presents a unique and commendable feature of African American solidarity. Still research is sparse and difficult to come by, this is truer in some cases than in others. Depending on the aptitude of the students, research may have to be conducted in group settings or provided by the instructor. While this poses a challenge in the unit, it also serves to illustrate just how much of history is left out of text books. Research roadblocks may be used as a way to initiate a discussion regarding this topic.

**Nicodemus, Kansas**

During the post-Civil War era many “black colonies” appeared across the state of Kansas. Fear of re-enslavement and racism pushed many newly freed slaves from Missouri, Kentucky and other southern states toward the West. Although many all black settlements sprang up, very few lasted (Wood, 2000) In 1876 W. R. Hill, a white man, who encouraged blacks to settle their own lands and governments, began campaigning for one of the first successful black colonies, Nicodemus. In 1877 the “colored exodus,” as the large migration of the black population out of the south was named, hit in full force increasing Nicodemus’ population significantly (Kansas State Historical Society, 2009).

Simon P. Roundtree, a Reverend and Nicodemus’ first official resident quickly issued a proclamation calling for all ex-slaves to aid in the development of the city. Despite very serious hardships, including lack of building materials, dug outs as the only shelters and white opposition from the surrounding counties, Nicodemus began to prosper. In the March 21, 1879
issue of the Smith County Kansas Pioneer, the local newspaper, commented that Nicodemus residents “know how to work and are not afraid to do it.” (Wood, 2000).

The hard work paid off. By the mid-1880’s the dugouts were being replaced by permanent businesses (Kansas State Historical Society, 2009). The 30 new buildings constructed included a bank, many churches, four general stores, four hotels, three pharmacies, three grocery stores, four hotels, and two barber shops among other services (National Park Services, n.d.). Although Nicodemus remained a prosperous community through World War I, its agriculturally based economy was doomed when Missouri Pacific Rail Line and Union Pacific Line both rejected Nicodemus for a stop on the rail road (Kansas Historical Society, 2009, National Park Services, n.d).

Agriculturally based communities are dependent on railways for the import and export of goods. The town of Nicodemus reached its maximum potential in the late 1880’s, due to the railroads refusing them in 1887 and 1888. Despite this, Nicodemus still exists today, although it is a very small town. The small town of Nicodemus served as a beacon of hope to African Americans throughout America during this time of uncertainty.

**Princeville, North Carolina**

Princeville, North Carolina boasts the oldest black incorporated town in America. Immediately following the Civil War a group of freed slaves settled on the banks of the Tarboro River where the Union Army camp was located (North Carolina Language and Life Project, n.d.). Originally named Freedom Hill, by the freed slaves in 1865, the land was granted to them because of its undesirable nature. (Gosier, 2001). Freedom Hill was built on a flood plain, and this later proved to be quite a problem. Despite its ill-chosen location, Freedom Hill began developing shops,
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churches, schools, and held elections. Mount Zion Primitive Baptist Church was built in 1876, which is the oldest African American Church in the state.

One very pivotal resident of Freedom Hill was carpenter Turner Prince. Prince used his learned trade during slavery to build a strong community for his family and other former slaves. Prince’s contribution was so large that when Freedom Hill asked congress to be incorporated in 1885 they named the town Princeville in his honor. This was done in spite of the white folk’s suggestion that the town be named after President Garfield. (Geiser, 2001).

Floods struck the town over and over again, first in 1887, then again in 1919, 1924 and 1940 (North Carolina Language and Life Project). Each time these floods were completely devastating, but each time the community simply waited the floods out and returned to rebuild. In 1965 a levy was finally built, allowing for significant economic development within Princeville. However in 1999 Hurricane Floyd broke the levee and the town is still in the recovery process. Although the hurricane was devastating it has contributed to the rediscovery of Princeville. Media coverage on the hurricane helped to resurface its historic, and largely forgotten, past (Geiser, 2001, North Carolina Language and Life Project).

**Eatonville, Florida**

Eatonville and Princeville disagree about which truly is the oldest incorporated black town. Although Princeville was incorporated in 1885 and Eatonville in 1887, Eatonville argues that because Princeville had 45 white residents until 1900 it cannot be counted as an all black town when incorporated (Johnson, 1992). In the literature, both cities openly claim the title, and nearly ignore this obvious discrepancy.
Unlike Princeville, which was founded on unclaimed land, Eatonville was bought from a white land holder named Josiah Eaton, for whom the town was named. Joe Clark was Eatonville’s first mayor and opened its first store (Damien, 2008). Although Eatonville is a historical treasure, it is mostly associated with Zora Neale Hurston. As her hometown, and the backdrop for one of her most famous books *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Eatonville is mostly highlighted in literature, not in research.

In regards to the unit it may be best to pick certain sections of Hurston’s book to supplement the lack of hard research. Additionally the Eatonville City website is currently down and has been for a number of weeks, and this may prove to be a valuable resource. Today Eatonville struggles to survive. Its poverty rates are twice that of the national average, and it just nearly dodged having a highway constructed through the center of the town (Damien, 2008).

**Hobson City, Alabama**

After being excluded from better housing in the city of Oxford Alabama, blacks found themselves forced together in the Mooree Quarter. Due to this concentrated large African American Population a black Justice of Peace was elected before 1900. In response, the Mayor of Oxford redrew city boundaries to exclude the district (Alabama Historical District). The black community sought the advice of Attorney Ross Blackmon, who encouraged them to seek incorporation (Blackmon, 1947). After being incorporated on July 20, 1899 this area was renamed Hobson City (Alabama Historical Commission, 2009).

At that time Hobson City had 135 families, but by the 1920s the city’s population reached 1900. In 1905 C.E. Hanna constructed the city’s first school, Hobson City and Oxford Academy. After
receiving state and county recognition for its manual training, Hobson City and Oxford Academy became the Calhoun County Training School in 1923 (Alabama Historical Commission, 2009).

Today Hobson City is on the “Alabama’s Most Endangered Sites for 2009.” In addition to businesses having left the city, even basic services such as trash collection and public safety are on a volunteer basis.

**Sweet Auburn District, Atlanta, GA**

All the previously mentioned black communities were actual municipalities and operated completely separate from neighboring white cities and towns. One of the major factors in the ultimate downfall within each community was lack of transportation and access to important resources, because of their location in rural areas. However there existed a number of districts throughout urban America that allowed blacks to prosper. The Sweet Auburn District in Atlanta GA fell into this category.

While some historically significant achievements did occur in the Auburn District before the Civil War, development grew exponentially with the Emancipation Proclamation. Big Bethel AME was originally built in 1840. Although it had to be rebuilt after a fire, Bethel AME was critically involved in the development of the Auburn District and even loaned its facilities for the creation of the first black public school in the city in 1879 (National Park Services, Spirit of Sweet Auburn). Mount Zion Baptist Church was constructed in 1868, which was the second African American Baptist Church founded in Atlanta. Banks and other financial institution sprung up right around the turn of the century, beginning in 1891 with the Atlanta Loan and Trust Company. This was followed by the first chartered insurance association operated by blacks in Atlanta, the Union Mutual Insurance Company was founded in 1897 (Spirit of Sweet Auburn).

Sweet Auburn District was home to *The Daily World* office, which was the first black-owned daily newspaper. The Royal Peacock, as it was later renamed, served as a social gathering place and held performances by some the biggest named music stars of the time, including B.B.King. Despite all this success Sweet Auburn district has fallen victim to crime and abandonment, which was greatly
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exasperated by the construction of a highway through the center of the community. While sizable efforts are underway to restore this historic site, presently Auburn Street seems to attract more pan handling and drug distribution than black intellectuals (National Park Services).

**Greenwood Avenue, Tulsa, Oklahoma**

The discovery of nearby oil field, later called Glen Pool, in what was the once sleepy rural town of Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1905 catapulted the city into the industrial age. By 1910 the population had grown to 10,000 and by 1920 reached 100,000. Both whites and blacks a like flocked the city that was rumored to be the city of reinvention, success and reward for hard work. On the outskirts of downtown existed a predominantly black community whose growth in numbers and success stories mirrored those of their white neighbors. Sometimes referred to resentfully as “Little Africa” by whites, the district running along the Greenwood Avenue was home to nearly 10,000 black men, women and children by 1921. It served as the back bone to the black community; its financial success earned it the title “Black Wall Street.” (Ellsworth).

Housing developments for African Americans were all centrally located in the Northern part of Tulsa. In addition to being centrally located for transportation on Frisco Yard train line, Greenwood avenue was the only street that did not intersect in the white neighborhoods. Much like the “Black Wall Street,” Greenwood Avenue was something that the African American community could call their own. Access to crucial resources coupled with the hard work and faith, resulted in one of the wealthiest black districts in all of America (Ellsworth, 1982).

Sadly the white community was both intimidated and concerned with African American success. The harsh reality of living in antebellum but pre civil rights America really came to head in 1921 (Oklahoma Historical Society). On that fateful day a black man tripped in an elevator and
reached out to regain his balance, accidently grabbing a white woman. The white community felt justified in completely destroying the 35 square block area that was pinnacle of black success at the time. Death tolls were estimated to be around 300.

Although the community members managed to rebuild parts of the district, it never reached the same level of vitality. Still, the community managed to remain in existence and semi-prosperous until the end of the twentieth century. At which time economic climate change, urban renewal, integration, the aging of the original pioneers, and the construction of a highway through the center of the district were the primary factors leading to its slow decline (Oklahoma Historical Society, Going Back to T Town).

**Conclusion**

These communities are just a few of the hundreds that formed across America after the abolition of slavery and before integration. While this paper cannot do justice to the accomplishments of each place, hopefully in highlighting some, the students can appreciated the greater idea behind them all. African Americans have suffered immensely at the hand of white Americans, but what makes them such a remarkable community is their persistence, adaptability, and the determination to not be a victim. Each of the communities explored are testimonies to this very fact.
Section II.

Activities

Activity 1: Let’s Map It

As an introduction to the unit acquire a United States map before class highlight the above listed communities. Break the students down into six groups and ask them to find the following current information: demographics, year founded, and the mayor or other political affiliates. (Note: for Greenwood and Sweet Auburn have them find the larger city in which they were located). Once done, have the students write the information on the map directly while presenting the information to their classmates. Ask if anyone knows the significance of any of the above places. After discussion, lecture about the basic information presented in the research portion of this paper.

Activity 2: Let me be your Tour Guide

This activity will be a long term group project. In the same groups from activity one, instruct the students to conduct research on their corresponding city or district. While you have control about how in depth you want your students to go, make sure they cover the following questions:

- How and when was it founded? (note: in Greenwood and Sweet Auburn specific dates may be hard to come by, so have them provide an estimate based on the influx of African Americans)
- Who were the instrumental people or organizations in its development or founding?
- When was the city or district at its peak?
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- What makes this place unique? (i.e. Zora Neal Hurston for Eatonville, Calhoun County Training School for Hobson City, Hurricanes in Princeville)

- What major buildings or institutions existed there during the city’s peak (i.e. banks, libraries, stores and schools)? (Note: this question will be instrumental for the next activity)

- What does it look like now?

If you wish you can have the class present this information or just turn it in as a report.

**Activity 3: City Planning**

Based on the findings of activity 2 have them construct a poster board illustrating what they believe the city would have looked like during its peak. Many of the online resources provide in this bibliography have actual pictures of buildings. Students may elect to print these out and paste them, or draw them, or use a computer program to digitally display their findings. What’s important is that they include some real places (i.e. the Bethel AME church in Atlanta, the store founded by Joe Clark in Eatonville, the District No. 1 School in Nicodemus etc.). However not all sites have to be that specific. In much of my research I found statements like “it had several beauty parlors,” therefore in these cases the student should be sure to include them but no further information need be provided. When finished the students should present their findings to the class and the boards should be displayed.

**Activity 4: Research Roadblocks**

This activity can be done before, after or during the research for City Planning and Let me be your Tour Guide. As mentioned in the introduction research can be very difficult to come by,
books, websites committed to maintaining the city or district, and primary sources (i.e. videos
with first hand interviews or newspapers) offer the most information, but it is very time
consuming. Research may have to be done in group settings or websites may need to be provided
to the students to ensure they find anything at all.

However these difficulties can be used to demonstrate to students how under represented black
accomplishments are in American history. Additionally the black community tends to emphasize
oral history, a practice which dates back to slavery when slaves weren’t allowed to write. These
are important aspects to understanding the role African Americans played in history. Hold a class
discussion on this.

Some questions to include can be:

- What kinds of difficulties have you found in your research?
- Have you ever heard about these communities before? They are major historical
  achievements. If you have, where did you hear about them? If you have not, why do you
  think that is?
- How would lack of acknowledgement feel, if it happened to you? (In this question try to
  apply this to their lives. For example what if you got straight A’s and your parents never
  said anything about it?)
- What kind of effect do you think this had in the black community? (With this question I
  am trying to emphasize the persistence and self-efficacy of the African American
  community.)

*Activity 5: Choo Choo, Vroom Vroom and other sounds of success or failure*
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The Greenwood district’s success was due in part to the access they had to the train, and the later decline was partly attributed to construction of a highway through the center of the district. Nicodemus’ fate was sealed when the train line refused to build a stop there. The Sweet Auburn District declined greatly after a highway was built directly through it. Eatonville narrowly escaped the same fate through the intervention of the Zora Neale Hurston Community. Princeville was destroyed after the levies broke. Hobson City also faltered after construction of a highway.

Transportation is critical to the success and failure of these communities. Have the students identify this factor in the city they have been working on, and have an open discussion about it. If it is possible have them illustrate on their boards where the highway was built, or the hurricane hit or where they wanted to have the train built.

Activity 6: It’s Movie Time

Bring in Going Back to T Town and This Side of the River (Note: at the time of writing this This Side of the River was still underway but promised a very soon release date). Watch both and have the students discuss what they saw.

Guiding questions:

- What were the major similarities?
- What were the major differences?
- Princeville is a city, whereas Greenwood is a district. Did you notice any difference due to these factors specifically? (here I want to address that white folks actively participated
in the destruction of Greenwood, where as they passively participated in the destruction of Princeville)

- What role do you think proximity to white people played in both the riots and responses to the hurricanes?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an all black city versus an all black district?

**Activity 7: It's Reading Time**

Either pick sections or have the class read both *Their Eyes were Watching God* and *Where Peachtree meets Sweet Auburn: A Saga of Two Families and the Making of Atlanta*. These novels both paint the picture of living in these communities during their peaks. Comparing and contrasting the experience will provide the students with an opportunity to address these in more subjective manor.

Guiding Questions:

- What were the major similarities and difference in each of these places?
- How was living in a district different then living in an all black town?
- If you were the main character where would you prefer to live?
- In what ways did the characters in the books live different lives in response to their location? (i.e. was there more fear present in the Auburn District or Eatonville?)

**Activity 8: Churches**

One constant in every community was the construction and maintenance of places of worship. Have each group identify one or two important churches, and the role they played in the community. Ask them why they think that church played such an important role in their
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communities. If there’s time, present them with the current state of black faith based communities, and discuss how the fragmentation impacts African Americans presently.

**Activity 9: and of course the Schools**

Just like Churches, schools were present in each community. Have the students identify the schools in their communities and discuss their quality. Compare this with other schools for black children who did not live in all African American districts or cities. Which is better? What are the advantages and disadvantages of both scenarios? If there is time, also present information on black student achievement after integration and compare and contrast this.

**Activity 10: What does it all mean?**

By this point in the unit students will hopefully begin to question integration and whether or not it was a good thing for the black community. To be clear I am not in favor of segregation, but I want to provide the students with an opportunity to see how strong the black community was during this time. This will naturally lead to these questions, although that’s not my intention with the unit. Still these feelings need to be explored. Prepare yourself for an intense discussion as you ask the following questions:

- What are your feelings after completing this unit?
- How, if at all, has it transformed your thoughts regarding blacks, whites, and integration?
- Do you have any lingering questions, concerns or thoughts you’d like to express?
Bibliography

Section III.

General

Roman, C., A Knowledge of History is Conducive to Racial Solidarity. (1911)

Princeville, North Carolina


Eatonville, FL

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**Tulsa, OK**


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**Sweet Auburn District (Atlanta, GA)**


**Nicodemus, KS**


**Hobson City, AL**