

**The Historic Context for
African American History
in Muskogee, Oklahoma**

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this document is to present information regarding African American history in the vicinity of today's Muskogee, Oklahoma. Documentation reveals that African Americans have been in the vicinity of Muskogee since the early 1800s. However, they arrived in significant numbers as freedmen or slaves with the Muskogee (Creek) Indians in the immigrations of 1828 and 1836. "African Creeks" were farming in the Three Forks (Three Rivers) vicinity when Muskogee was founded as a station on the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad in 1872. Freedmen from eastern states and African Creeks formed the nucleus of a vibrant African American population in Muskogee in the 1890s. However, Oklahoma statehood in 1907 ushered in segregation of African Americans in neighborhoods south, west, and northwest of Muskogee's central business district. Within those neighborhoods African American residents created vibrant communities bolstered by schools and churches. Black businessmen and entrepreneurs created a commercial district along and near 2nd Street. Elementary schools in black neighborhoods and the Manual Training High School (1909-1970) produced young people unusually well prepared for business and the professions. The end of segregation in the mid-1900s brought Muskogee's African Americans improvements in civil rights and more access to higher education, but interviewees who lived through those times believed it weakened the strong sense of community that had supported and sustained them for decades. Even today Muskogee remains rich in resources—buildings, a park, and potential historic districts—that recall the history of African Americans in Muskogee.

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The Historic Context for African American History in Muskogee, Oklahoma

Muskogee, perhaps more than any other town of its size in Oklahoma, is historically associated with an African American population. In fact, African Americans were present at the future environs of Muskogee long before it was established. By the early 1800s, Anglo-American hunting parties that often included black slaves entered the lands west of Arkansas—part of the Louisiana Purchase after 1803—in search of furbearing animals. One slave was reported in the Scritchfield bison hunting party that Osages attacked in June 1817 near Clear Creek on the present McCurtain-Choctaw county line. The Three Forks (Rivers) area also attracted hunters, traders, and explorers. In 1821 Hugh Glenn and Jacob Fowler gathered a trading party at Glenn's post just north of the mouth of the Verdigris River. Their aim was to travel west to Santa Fe in Mexican territory. Among them was a man named Paul, Fowler's slave yet a full participant in the venture. Colonel A. P. Chouteau, whose trading post was about two miles further upriver, was also a slave-owner. Although deep in debt at his death in 1838, he willed thirty-two slaves to his half-Osage children.¹

Unfortunately for his heirs, most of those slaves ended up in the hands of Muskogee, or Creek, Indians who had recently arrived in the Three Forks vicinity. Federal pressure to force the all eastern Indian nations to move west of the Mississippi River divided the Muskogee people as it did some other Indian nations. When Chief William McIntosh of the Lower Creek division signed a federal removal treaty in violation of a recent Muskogee law against selling his nation's land, a war party executed him in April 1825. Although the federal government rejected that

¹ Rex W. Strickland, "Miller County, Arkansas, the Frontier that Men Forgot," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (Number 1): 14-15; Grant Foreman, *Pioneer Days in the Early Southwest* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Book edition, 1994), 49, 258-259; Kaye M. Teall, *Black History in Oklahoma: A Resource Book* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Public Schools, 1971), 13.

treaty, some of his Lower Creek followers moved west in 1827-1828 to new lands in the “Indian Territory.” Among them were Anglo-Muscogee families such as the McIntoshes, Stidhams, Kennards, Harrods (Herods), and Graysons, who took their African slaves west with them. Muscogees who stayed in their old homeland were soon forced to accept individual land ownership by allotment of the lands they traditionally held in common. A census of them taken as part of the allotment process revealed the Upper Creeks had 445 slaves and remaining Lower Creeks owned 457.² That allotment, according to Principal Chiefs Motey Kennard and Echo Harjo, resulted in “evils and evils continually” as white settlers overran the new individual Muscogee holdings.³ By 1836 the Upper Creeks, too, had little choice except to move west. The “long road” took too many of their lives as they coped with severe hardships on the way. Their new lands extended west from the Three Forks to the Texas Panhandle. It was some of those Muscogees—two of the Graysons and the Upper Creek speaker Opothle Yahola, a wealthy and politically influential slaveholder—who were accused of having appropriated the slaves A. P. Chouteau had willed to his children.⁴

The Lower Creeks who arrived in the late 1820s had settled in the Arkansas River Valley west of Fort Gibson, recently established in 1824. Those who had adopted Anglo-American ways—often mixed-bloods like Chilly and Daniel N. McIntosh—laid out individual plantations, while the more traditional people settled as *tvlvv*, “towns,” and continued communal farming. By the late 1850s their new settlements were known politically as the Arkansas District. They had brought with them 498 slaves and thirteen free blacks. By the later 1830s the rest of their people, mostly more traditional Upper Creeks, had arrived and settled southeast along the

² Mary Jane Warde, *George Washington Grayson and the Creek Nation, 1843-1920* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 15-17.

³ Motey Carnard and Echo Harjo to Creek Agent William H. Garrett, January 19, 1860, Creek National Records, reel 9, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁴ Foreman, *Pioneer Days*, 258-259.

Canadian River Valley. Designated politically the Canadian District, its largest community was at North Fork Town. They, too, had brought their slaves with them as well as free blacks living in their nation. The 1832 census reported 445 slaves as well as fifty-five free blacks.⁵

According to some historians, African slaves in the Muscogee Nation often had more independence than those in other Indian nations or neighboring Anglo-American states. Most were farmers, but there were also blacksmiths, cowboys, horse trainers, and boatmen. Those who could speak English sometimes served as interpreters in trade and other negotiations for owners who spoke only Muscogee. Slaves with special skills could earn money on the side, with which they might buy freedom for themselves and their family members.⁶ Some slaves lived in relatively unrestricted conditions. Nellie Johnson told an interviewer about 1938 that she was glad to have belonged to Arkansas District Chief Roley McIntosh, who allowed his slaves to choose the location of their homes, which they furnished and decorated however they chose. Her family raised his crops and stock but also produced their own. “Old Chief,” as Nellie called him, “never bothered the slaves about anything....” Occasionally he sent for some of the chickens, turkeys, hogs, corn, and wheat they raised for the market, but mostly he left them alone. “I was a big girl before I knowed very much about belonging to him,” Nellie concluded.⁷

Gary Zellar, too, in his study of the African Creeks pointed out that the *estelvste*, “black people,” as the Muscogees called them, “spoke the same language, ate the same foods, held the same worldview, and shared kinship ties with the Creek people.”⁸ He also noted their unusual independence and entrepreneurial spirit even though they were slaves. Being allowed to settle

⁵ Gary Zellar, *African Creeks: Estelvste and the Creek Nation* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 24-25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁷ Quoted in Mary Jane Warde, *When the Wolf Came: The Civil War and the Indian Territory* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press), 32.

⁸ Zellar, *African Creeks*, xvii.

and farm wherever they chose on land claimed by their owner gave them an unusual degree of independence. Muscogee law opposed allowing slaves to acquire property, but Jacob Perryman, who lived a few miles north of today's Muskogee, was allowed to keep ten horses, two mules, four steers, and seventy-five hogs (usually allowed to range free). Toby Drew, who lived at the Creek Agency not far from today's Muskogee, had horses, mules, and steers as well as a hundred hogs. Troy Steadham, who farmed very near, perhaps within, today's Muskogee city limits, owned 150 head of cattle, as well as horses, oxen, and hogs. Likewise, it was illegal for slaves to own firearms, but few African Creeks, slave or free, did not have a gun for hunting, which could be used to acquire meat, pelts, and other products.⁹

While some African Creek slaves had more liberty and independence than others in their nation or in the Cherokee Nation just across the Arkansas River, they still did not have freedom. When civil war in the United States threatened in late 1860 and early 1861, many of them eagerly seized the opportunity to gain it.

Old removal-era antagonisms such as the Muscogees experienced in the 1820s and 1830s flared again in the Indian Territory as they, the Cherokees, and the Seminoles tried to decide whether to side with the new Confederacy or keep faith with their removal treaties with the United States. In the end, when the federal government ignored their genuine concerns and failed to keep its removal-treaty obligations, these three Indian nations joined the Choctaw Nation and Chickasaw Nation, also under intense pressure from the State of Texas, in signing treaties of alliance with the Confederacy. In the Muscogee Nation, Opothle Yahola assumed leadership of those who opposed a Confederate alliance. By mid-summer 1861 like-minded Muscogees who wanted no part in a white man's war gathered around him at his large, slave-worked ranch near today's Checotah, Oklahoma. Jacob Perryman, too, left his farm at the Three

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

Forks and ran away along with other African Creek slaves who saw the opportunity for freedom. Faced with a threat to their slave property, the Indian nations and Texans joined forces to stop them in three late 1861 battles.¹⁰

What followed was four years of vicious warfare that devastated the Indian Territory, scattered and cost the lives of many of its people whatever their race, and demolished almost all that had been built and gained since the removals a generation earlier. African Creek men who had followed Opothle Yahola on his 1861 withdrawal to Unionist Kansas were recruited into the 1st Indian Home Guard. They returned to the territory in blue uniforms to capture and hold Fort Gibson for the Union, help defeat Confederate-allied forces at the pivotal July 1863 Battle of Honey Springs, and punish the Choctaw Nation in the 1864 Union campaign through southeastern Indian Territory. At the war's end in 1865, the federal government punished the territory's Indian nations in spite of their contributions to its victory and demanded freedom and Indian national citizenship for their slaves.¹¹

Word went out that the African Creek freedmen must go to Creek Agency near today's Muskogee to register as citizens of the Indian nation. Some who had gone to Kansas with Opothle Yahola were lucky to survive the flight and years of dislocation in refugee camps. Others had spent the war years no further away than Fort Gibson across the river, sick and starving in even more squalid camps. Still others had been taken by their pro-Confederate owners to the relative safety of the Red River Valley. A few had never left at all but just endured conditions until the war ended. Free now to live wherever they wanted, African Creek freedmen farmed or began businesses, such as the hotel in which white school teacher Minnie Rector Fitts stayed while traveling to a new assignment. At first skeptical, she soon discovered that it was

¹⁰ See Warde, *When the Wolf Came*, 41-87.

¹¹ These events and conditions are covered in Warde, *When the Wolf Came* and in Zellar, *African Creeks*, 41-74.

very clean and, she recalled, served an “excellent dinner.”¹² African freedmen created a small town near Creek Agency, for which they provided services as, among other things, interpreters, teamsters, and wood cutters. There was church there and a new freedman school taught by Ellen Rentie, an African freedwoman. Others settled on lands they chose in the Arkansas-Verdigris river bottom or went to their old home locations. The Muscogee Nation organized a new constitutional government in 1867. African Creeks in the Three Forks area were assigned to the Arkansas Colored Town for political purposes. Their representatives were entitled to seats in the Muscogee Nation legislature composed of the lower House of Warriors and the upper House of Kings. They participated fully in the government of their nation.¹³

Although peace brought some change for the better, the Muscogee Nation and the other Indian nations were struggling to survive in the post-Civil War decades. For having been a Confederate ally, the federal government forced it to give up much of its land base as well as railroad right-of-ways to benefit Washington’s powerful railroad lobby. Still, American citizens wanted what was left, and the railroads demanded their access to the Indian Territory. By late 1871 the tracks of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (Katy) Railroad were approaching the Three Forks. About three miles south of the place the tracks crossed the Arkansas River, a rough little settlement designated “Muskogee” sprang up, it seemed, overnight. Supporting its slim chance of surviving as a town was the federal decision to consolidate the agencies it maintained in the Five Civilized Tribes and place a single “Union Agency” at Muskogee. A few years later establishing the federal court there further bolstered its chances of success.¹⁴

¹² Interview of Minnie Rector Fitts, 30:116, Indian Pioneer History, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

¹³ Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance: A History of the Creek Indians* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), 174; Zellar, *African Creeks*, 92-97.

¹⁴ V. V. Masterson, *The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 143-144, 146-147, 228.

Non-Indians were officially barred from Indian lands unless they had a permit from the pertinent Indian nation. Still, permit or no permit, ambitious and energetic Indian Territory businessmen were quick to set up shop at the infant town. J. S. Atkinson, A. W. Robb, Colonel Mitchell, J. A. Patterson, and George Zufall quickly established businesses there, including a mercantile, hotel, and blacksmith shop. Other non-Indian settlers soon followed. It is not known when the first African Americans moved into the new town. However, Patterson persuaded Sarah Davis, a freedwoman, to move her well-run tavern, known for its good food, to relocate from the Creek Agency village at the base of Fern Mountain to a new spot near the Muskogee depot.¹⁵

In this same post-war decade, “foreign” African Americans began to enter the Indian Territory. Freed slaves in “the states,” as Indian Territory people called them, found life as tenant farmers there difficult and, lacking funds to purchase land, had little hope of improvement. At the urging of Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, a former slave, thousands moved west to Kansas in search of free land, while others came to the Indian Territory. Eventually twenty-five all-black towns grew up in the Indian Territory. Some immigrants, though, moved into Muskogee, joining the African Creek freedmen settled in or near there. Until the 1890s most black people in Muskogee were African Creeks, but then the balance shifted toward the immigrants. Relations between the two groups were somewhat strained. The newcomers had few resources and poor prospects, while the African Creeks were Muskogee citizens in their home country. They participated in their national government and had access to its lands. The newcomers, though, saw them as ignorant and lazy, while the African Creeks viewed the new arrivals as dishonest and too subservient to white people. They might even be a threat to the Creek freedmen’s land

¹⁵ *A Proud Past: A Pictorial History of Muskogee, Oklahoma* (Marceline, Mo.: D. Books Publishing, Inc., 1998), 3; John D. Benedict, *Muskogee and Northeastern Oklahoma* (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922), 343.

and status. The latter ostracized them, refused to let their children intermarry with them, and denied them membership in their churches or even burial in their cemeteries. The two groups got past their differences, however, as by the early 1900s both faced growing white hostility in the Twin Territories.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Muskogee continued to grow and enhance its position as a leading town in the Indian nations. Creation of the Indian International Fair spread its reputation in the territory. It was at the 1879 fair, though, that Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz told stunned representatives of fifteen Indian nations that they must give up treaty-guaranteed tribal reservations, become individual landowners, and prepare for the arrival of homesteaders. These long-feared developments would affect African Creek freedmen in little more than a decade. They also opened the door for land purchase by non-Indians, including freedmen.¹⁷

As these events occurred, Muskogee progressed toward permanency. Establishment of churches, schools, newspapers, and improved public works helped. In 1886 the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company mapped the growing town to set rates for it. Blocks mapped west of the railroad tracks included Okmulgee and Agency (Broadway) streets between the railroad and Lake (2nd) Street. Both sides of Main Street between Agency and Okmulgee were lined with businesses. Turner and Byrne's lumber yard dominated the block. Stores on the west side sold hardware, furniture, drugs, and jewelry. Across the street smaller buildings housed a meat market, drugstore, combined bakery and restaurant, harness shop, lodging house, doctors' offices, and the *Indian Journal* newspaper. Houses were sprinkled over the surrounding blocks.

¹⁶ "Exodusters," Kansas Historical Society, Kansapedia, < <http://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/exodusters/17162> > June 8, 2014; Zellar, *African Creeks*, 123; Linda Williams Reese, *Trail Sisters: Freedwomen in Indian Territory, 1850-1890* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2013), 109-110; Charles T. Ledbetter, *Alliance Against the Odds: The Manual Training High School Story* (Cross Lanes, W.V.: D & J Educational Consulting and Publishing Services, 2008).

¹⁷ Warde, *Grayson*, 100-101, 123-124.

A note stated that there were more “scattered dwellings” east of the tracks. South of what passed then for “downtown,” there was a millinery shop in the block south of Okmulgee Street and next to the tracks, while two hotels dominated the block west of the depot. The millinery shop may have been operated by an African American because the Sanborn surveyor noted simply two “Negro shanties” and a “pig yard” nearby. A Presbyterian church appeared on the southeast corner of Okmulgee and Lake streets, but there was no evidence yet of the many black-owned and operated businesses that would eventually line 2nd Street in the commercial district. The next year a fire on March 27, 1887 destroyed thirty-six business buildings, most of them built of wood, including the *Indian Journal* newspaper office. It moved to Eufaula, where it still remains the oldest continuously publishing newspaper in Oklahoma.¹⁸

The Sanborn maps for 1894 showed new industries—a planing mill, roller mill, and cotton gin near the railroad tracks—but no large industries. A building across the street from the U.S. Courthouse on Lake (2nd) Street south of Court Street was labeled “Negro Lodging.” The “Negro School” had appeared on the west side of Lake Street south of Okmulgee Street. Lastly, a “Negro Baptist Church” had been built on the southeast corner of Court Street and Lipscomb (State) Street, a space today occupied by a law office at 428 Court Street. There was little change in 1896 and 1898, except by the latter year a large new building had appeared—the Offices of the Dawes Commission (no longer extant) near the east end of the block between Agency (Broadway) and Okmulgee streets near Lake Street.¹⁹

That building was hard evidence that what the Five Civilized Tribes had long feared had come to pass. In spite of their objections and treaties guaranteeing them their sovereignty and lands as long as the grass grows and the water flows, the federal government at the end of the

¹⁸ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1886, Edmon Low Library, Oklahoma State University; Grant Foreman, *Muskogee: The Biography of an Oklahoma Town* (St. Louis, Mo.: Blackwell Wielandy Company, n.d.), 74.

¹⁹ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1894.

19th century had mandated the dissolution of their constitutional governments and the allotment of their communally-held lands to individuals. This affected all Muscogee citizens, including African Creeks who lived in or near Muskogee. In the mid-1890s the U. S. Geological Survey surveyed all the Muscogee lands, and the Dawes Commission, headquartered at Muskogee, enrolled all Muscogee citizens, soon to become citizens of the United States. All, regardless of their ages, abilities, or literacy levels, were supposed to choose 160-acre land allotments; and the federal government expected a surplus of land that would be thrown open to non-Indians. The Five Civilized Tribes, including the Muscogee Nation, however, avoided having “surplus” lands by allotting all their land to their own citizens. Even so, never having had to deal with such things as leases, deeds, land sales, or taxes, many allottees, some illiterate, were ripe for exploitation. Although African Creeks among Five Civilized Tribes freedmen had the best educational opportunities, many were unprepared for the rapacious “grafters” who descended on them. Lands in and near today’s Muskogee were allotted to Muscogee citizens and incorporated over time as the town expanded. Moreover, some of its most respected citizens were involved in the process.²⁰

Through these developments Muskogee continued to grow, even after another devastating fire swept through downtown 1899. In the rebuilding, streets were straightened, and Lake Street became 2nd Street. What had been the “Negro School” in the block of 2nd Street south of Okmulgee Street was labeled in the 1900 Sanborn Maps as a “Negro Church.”²¹

According to Zellar, in the 1890s the black population of Muskogee was primarily African Creek. By the early years of the 20th century, though, the balance shifted as African Americans moved in from outside the territory. Both groups established themselves in the town

²⁰ Warde, *Grayson*, 175-178; 188-190, 193-205; Zellar, *African Creeks*, 177, 223; 236-237.

²¹ *A Proud Past: A Pictorial History of Muskogee, Oklahoma*, vol. II (Marceline, Mo.: D-Books Publishing, 2004), 4; Sanborn Map, 1900.

that first decade. The Muskogee city directories for 1905 and 1906 reveal black people (their race is denoted by a “c.”) working as cooks, laundresses, domestics, porters, laborers, and janitors. Many lived in rented rooms or boarding houses. For example, William Alexander, a cook at the City Chop House, roomed at 330 Emporia Street. W. A. Allen, a brickmason, boarded at 10th Street and Denison. They were in better circumstances than Travis Anderson, a laborer, and his wife Emma, who lived in a tent on North Main Street near Howard Street. That couple was not alone in such a hardscrabble life. There were many skilled black people in Muskogee—plumbers, brick masons, barbers, clerks, machinists, butchers, tailors, carpenters, and blacksmiths. M. V. Gentry was a jeweler at 228 North Main Street, while William P. Greene was a photographer at 125 South 3rd Street. Women, too, had skilled jobs or owned their own businesses. Mrs. Lydia A. Cobb was a hairdresser and manicurist, while Mrs. Dorether Coats owned The Exchange Dressmaking, a business on Court Street. Mrs. L. C. Clark was a milliner and dressmaker at 116 South 2nd Street. There were also men and women professionals. For example, M. L. Flynn, Jessie C. Dickerson, John M. Davis, E. T. Butler, and William M. Adams were physicians or surgeons, while George P. Craig was a pharmacist. Teachers included Florence G. Arrington, Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Biggers, Hattie Bradley, Cicero Byrd, and Luvinnia Curry. G. L. Trigg had graduated from Harvard University of Washington, class of 1890, and been a professor at the Colored National School of the Creek Nation for eight years and at the Colored Orphan Home (formerly Tullahassee Mission near Muskogee) for three years. His wife Prelia taught music at the same school for eight years. Both talented musicians, they now played for their guests at the Trigg Hotel at 501 South 2nd Street near the Frisco Depot.²²

²² Zellar, *African Creeks*, 123; *Moore's Directory of the City of Muskogee, Indian Territory* (n.p.: Matthew R. Moore, 1905), A-H.

Muskogee also had black entrepreneurs. Among them was William Ragsdale, who founded an undertaking business in 1889. Housed inconspicuously in a former 3rd Street livery stable until 1917, it was the first that provided such a service to Muskogee's black population. Tollie Julius Elliott, once an Indian Territory peddler, founded Elliott Brothers Clothing. It was at 203 South 2nd Street in 1904. Later a major department store at 111 South 2nd Street, it became a keystone in Muskogee's black business district and had separate stores for men and women. William Henry Twine, Sr., who had been a teacher and lawyer in Texas, moved to Muskogee in 1899. As editor of *The Muskogee Cimeter*, he reported on community life and concerns of the town's black population in the early 1900s.²³

By 1904, the St. Louis and San Francisco Railroad had also laid tracks into town, paralleling the Katy tracks but east several blocks. Near Dorchester Street it made a right turn west after joining the Midland Valley Rail Road line. It turned south again past today's Three Rivers Museum, housed in the former Frisco depot. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps indicate 2nd Street, the primary area of African American commerce in Muskogee, was by then lined with a variety of businesses, including a combination bowling alley and pool hall, restaurants, a bakery, and gentleman's clothing stores. A two-story building, labeled "Negro offices" with a hall on the second floor, was under construction on 2nd Street facing east. Nearby was a "Negro lodge hall" on the second floor of a building off the alley. What constituted industry in Muskogee at the time—the Muskogee Cotton Oil Company, the Patterson Mercantile Company's Cotton Gin, the roller mill, and the cotton compress—all lay east of the Katy tracks.²⁴

By 1905, according to Zellar, Muskogee had two black-owned banks. One of them, Creek Citizens Bank, had been founded by African Creeks A. G. W. Sango, W. A. Rentie, J. C.

²³ C. W. "Dub" West, *Muskogee: From Statehood to Pearl Harbour* (Muskogee, Okla.: Muskogee Publishing Company, 1976), 8-10; *A Proud Past*, vol. I, 79; Teall, *Black History*, 172, 181.

²⁴ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1904.

Johnson, J. P. Davison, and George Davison. Twine's *Muskogee Cimeter* was only one of three newspapers published in the town published by black editors. There were twenty-seven grocery stores and one wholesale grocery. Specialty stores offered jewelry, furniture, and dry goods. There were two drugstores, a café, a steam laundry, dress-making shops, and pharmacies. Customers could buy ice cream or get a shave and haircut. In the growing—but segregated—town, there were black real estate agents, including the Afro-American Investment and Realty of Muskogee which was a cooperative. Professional people included nine doctors, five dentists, a dozen lawyers, teachers, and stenographers. A. G. W. Sango headed the Muskogee Businessmen's League. Those who hoped to enter the business world could enroll in one of three business schools or the Sango Baptist College and Industrial Institute. It is likely the discovery of oil in the Indian Territory, particularly the rich Glenn Pool near Tulsa that year, drew some of these professionals to the Muskogee Nation.²⁵

Meanwhile, the tensions between the African Creeks and black immigrants from outside the territory faded with time and interaction, perhaps encouraged to some degree by civic and fraternal organizations along with their women's auxiliaries. Two lodges in Muskogee today identified in this survey are Trinity Masonic Lodge and M. W. Prince Hall Grand Lodge. According to Reese, Lois Perdue of Muskogee in 1908 organized Frances Harper Number One. This was the first chapter locally that would later affiliate with the National Association of Colored Women. Following this first club were the Matrons Mutual Improvement Circle, Royal Arts, and Mary Church Terrell clubs. Their primary emphasis was on civil rights for African Americans.²⁶

²⁵ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 237-238; Warde, *Grayson*, 207-208.

²⁶ See the Annotated List of Selected Resources. Reese, *Trail Sisters*, 136-137.

That became a primary concern for Muskogee's black residents with talk about 1904 of statehood for Oklahoma Territory and the Indian Territory. Black Republicans from the "Twin Territories" had contributed to President Theodore Roosevelt's election campaign in 1904, marched in his inaugural parade, and hoped for inclusion in his proposed "Square Deal" administration. However, in Muskogee's municipal elections that fall, Democrats charged that the Republicans, who opposed segregation laws generally, of favoring mixed schools and racial mixing. The Republicans reacted by splitting into factions—the "Roosevelt Club" white faction; the "Lincoln Club" states freedmen; and the African Creek "Muskogee Club" led by Twine, Sango, and Rentie. When Roosevelt visited Muskogee in April 1905, he spoke casually of joint statehood for the territories. That fall a convention favoring separate statehood for "the State of Sequoyah" met in Muskogee and, among other things, advocated segregation and restrictions on black people. Although Indian citizens overwhelmingly ratified the Sequoyah Constitution, the federal government had no intention of establishing an Indian state. What had been accomplished, according to Zellar, was construction of a strong state Democratic machine that would guarantee racial segregation. Not even a visit to Muskogee and speech by Booker T. Washington that autumn could change that.²⁷

So Muskogee and the rest of the Indian Territory in 1907 entered a State of Oklahoma moving rapidly into segregation. There was a protest meeting in Muskogee against the state constitution viewed as "Jim Crow"; however, the first order of business in the new state legislature was creating a "Jim Crow" system of laws. By 1907 Sanborn Fire Insurance maps showed three segregated schools for black children: Dunbar School on Altamont Street, Franklin School between North 9th and 10th streets at Denison and Emporia streets; and Douglass School at 6th and Indianapolis streets. Cars on trains and street cars were also segregated. In spite of a

²⁷ Zellar, *African Creeks*, 239-243.

petition by W. H. Twine for an injunction against it, Muskogee's street cars as well as the trains entering town were segregated. Next, after a meeting at Muskogee of black leaders from across the state, African Creek A. G. W. Sango led the losing fight against the grandfather law. The fight continued as late as 1938, when Muskogee citizen Eva May Simmons, with the help of the NAACP, filed a suit opposing a bond sale to benefit whites-only schools that black students could not attend.²⁸

So before the first decade of the 20th century ended, Muskogee had developed neighborhoods that were either white or black. The area east of the Katy tracks was white, and there were white neighborhoods, some of them quite affluent, on the west side, too, particularly along Okmulgee and Broadway streets and northward in areas such as Founders Place. Black neighborhoods spread across north Muskogee from the Katy railroad line toward Agency Hill. The 1912 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map showed the blocks of 3rd, Spruce, and 4th streets north of West Fondulac (today's Martin Luther King) Street labeled "Negro Settlement." A restaurant and filling station stood on the corner of North 4th Street and Fondulac. Widely spaced houses sat along the margins, but midway along 3rd Street was the Wheatley Branch Library, labeled "Colored."²⁹ Black neighborhoods—Southside and Midland Valley—lay south of Elgin Street and the Frisco and Midland Valley depot areas and ran down toward Coody Creek. However, over time the boundaries and neighborhoods shifted, particularly after mid-century when segregation began to give way to integration.³⁰

There were no large industrial areas in the black sections of town. Generally in Muskogee, in those early decades when rail was the most efficient transportation system,

²⁸ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1907; Arthur L. Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans: A History, 1541-1972* (New Orleans: Edwards Printing Company, 1972), 144, 149-150, 156, 172.

²⁹ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1912.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

manufacturing was located near the railroad tracks. Small manufacturing enterprises such as the mattress factory on the corner of North 3rd Street and West Fondulac Street were scattered through basically residential areas. Black commercial buildings were more common and were also sprinkled through black residential areas. They might appear as one or two contiguous buildings—a grocery, auto mechanic’s garage, seamstress’s shop, eatery, barbershop, or beauty parlor within a residential neighborhood. Another enterprise often found in a residential area was the funeral home. Following the 1889 example of William Ragsdale, other black businessmen established funeral homes. Two extant examples include the Granger Winn Funeral Home at 812 Emporia Street, still in operation, and Homes Funeral Home at 2103 Estelle Avenue, currently undergoing restoration. Cemeteries that accommodated African Americans, on the other hand, were generally outside the city limits. The exception today is Booker T. Washington Cemetery on the southeast corner of Fern Mountain Road and U.S. Highway 69.³¹

According to Ben Noble, who came to Muskogee in 1955 to be the minister of Antioch Baptist Church at 700 North 4th Street, “Well, I say that the church, when I came here, was the heart of the community.”³² Antioch was founded in 1910, with the ground breaking for the new building on May 7, 1913.³³ It was one of many extant examples from the first half of the twentieth century scattered throughout African American areas of Muskogee. Seven were listed in the 1906 city directory. That number had grown to thirty-four by 1942. The oldest remaining is First (Missionary) Baptist Church (National Register 1984) at 5th and Denison streets, constructed in 1900. Several new churches were built in the World War I era. Still standing are

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Interview of Ben Noble, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, “Muskogee African American Heritage Oral History Project,” (hereafter cited as MAAHOHP) Oklahoma Oral History Research Program, Edmon Low Library, Oklahoma State University.

³³ The present renovated building slightly postdates the period of eligibility for this study and so is not included in the Annotated List of Selected Resources. *A Proud Past*, vol. 1, 32-33.

Macedonia Baptist Church at 418 West Shawnee Avenue, St. Luke's Mt. Calvary Baptist Church at 626 Girard Street, Metropolitan Baptist Church at 827 Altamont Street, and Assumption Church and Parsonage at 540 South 3rd Street. To these were added in the 1920s Spencer United Methodist Church at 543 North 7th Street and the Lutheran Church at South 3rd Street and West Southside Boulevard (now Full Counsel Muskogee). Little Rose Baptist Church at 2332 Findlay Avenue was built in the early 1940s in western Muskogee. St. Luke's Baptist Church at 1624 Miller Street lay near the north edge of town when it was built about 1930. Hope Lutheran Church, then at 549 South 6th Street, was a black church but had a white pastor. Their building then was a Queen Anne Style house replaced later with a former army chapel and still later with a Contemporary style building.³⁴

Another strong support of Muskogee's African American community was its schools, in this case, schools set aside for black children. These eventually included Dunbar, Douglass, Langston, Wheatley, 24th Street, and Midland Valley. Wheatley School was built in 1929 in the "Y" neighborhood at the intersection of Fondulac (later Martin Luther King), Emporia, and 21st streets. It is abandoned but extant as of this study.³⁵

Former students interviewed in 2009 had good memories of those schools and respect for their teachers. Lansing Lee, born in 1953, attended Douglass Elementary School, which he considered "one of the best. My fifth grade teacher was teaching diagramming compound, complex sentences...and had us in great debates about whether a prepositional phrase was used as an adjective clause or an adverb clause." His classmates were shocked when they entered

³⁴ *Moore's Directory, City of Muskogee, Indian Territory, 1906* (Muskogee, Okla.: Matthew R. Moore, Publisher, 1906), 72; *Negro City Directory, 1941-1942*, Muskogee Public Library, Muskogee, Oklahoma; "Black Protestant Churches of Muskogee," State Historic Preservation Office, Oklahoma History Center, Oklahoma City, OK.

³⁵ Charles T. Ledbetter, *Alliance Against the Odds: The Manual Training High School Story*, vol. 1 (Cross Lanes, W.V.: D & J Educational Consulting and Publishing Services, 2008), preface.

junior high school to find other students did not know this material. “We had some great teachers at Douglass,” he concluded.³⁶

The most beloved of Muskogee’s schools was the Manual Training High School on Altamont Street. Established in 1909, it provided education to generations of Muskogee’s African American young people.³⁷ Muriel Desmuke, born in 1939, told an interviewer, “Manual had an excellent curriculum even though we were deprived of some things.... We always had books that were handed down through the White system and in many cases we didn’t have the supplies that we should have had.... But at Manual there was always an atmosphere of respect...for your teachers [and] adults.... Manual’s teachers respected the students, and I think the determination to turn out an excellent product...more than compensated for a lack of equipment and a lack of supplies.” Desmuke concluded, “Teachers were committed to seeing you succeed. The Black community also seemed to be committed to seeing that the kids got a good education....”³⁸

Some of those children were coming from poor homes by today’s standards. Desmuke told an interviewer, “I grew up in, at the time, the traditional black neighborhood. We didn’t have running water, which means we didn’t have inside toilets.... I didn’t feel deprived because that was the norm for most of us.” Bath time meant hauling in buckets of water to fill a number 3 metal tub. “Whatever we had,” Desmuke concluded, “it was acceptable.” However, the school’s flush toilets were a revelation.³⁹ Porter Reed and his family came to Oklahoma in 1927. He attended the Douglass elementary school before graduating from Manual in 1936. An athlete and a professional baseball player in the Negro League, he grew up during the Great Depression. “A

³⁶ Interview of Lansing Lee, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, MAAHOHP.

³⁷ West, *Muskogee*, 26.

³⁸ Quoted in Ledbetter, *Alliance Against the Odds*, vol. 2, 229.

³⁹ Interview of Muriel Desmuke, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, MAAHOHP.

lot of times,” he told an interviewer, “I went to school and didn’t have anything to eat, and didn’t have anything at home. Come home in the evening, we still didn’t have nothing. Maybe Mama would boil some potatoes or bring us some from work. And God took care of us.” Sometimes it was the sons of the well-to-do Simmons, Tollett, and Twine families who saw that he did not go hungry.⁴⁰ Donald Lee Oliver, a 1955 Manual graduate, remembered, “I had overalls with patches in them, and shoes that I would put cardboard in the bottom of them because I had worn them out.... I didn’t know how ‘po’ I was.... And thankfully, teachers [at Manual] didn’t make any difference in students.”⁴¹

Manual’s last year was 1970. The building had been deteriorating for some time, and by then desegregation meant its students could attend other Muskogee schools. Manual was demolished; however, there was another newer school close by on Altamont Street. The junior high school, a striking International Style building opened in 1953 is now Sadler Arts Academy, named for Dr. Samuel L. Sadler.⁴²

The Muskogee in which Desmuke, Reed, and Oliver grew up was segregated, with all the negatives and injustices that implies. However, the African American community in Muskogee, often at the neighborhood level, had constructed its own *place* within the limits set by others. The children of that community seemed to live in its spotlight—whether they wanted to or not.

Porter Reed, who grew up on South 7th Street, recalled it was a “good neighborhood, all the kids had us a park down there.... We could sleep out in the yard at night and sleep on the porch.” With three churches within a block, good neighbors, and good businessmen, he said, “The environment was real good. You had to mind everybody then.”⁴³ Lansing Lee ratified that.

⁴⁰ Interview of Porter Reed, September 3, Muskogee, Oklahoma, *ibid.*

⁴¹ Quoted in Ledbetter, *Alliance Against the Odds*, vol. 2, front matter.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 252.

⁴³ Interview of Porter Reed, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, MAAHOHP.

“The neighborhoods back then, you knew everybody and they knew you.... [I]f we got in trouble at school, at church, in the park, our parents were going to know about it before we got home. Neighbors had not only the green light to take care of the situation, but they basically exercised it.... [That] ...kind of kept things in check. It’s not that way now.” Lee explained, “...Our teachers lived in our neighborhoods. Our preachers lived in our neighborhoods. Most of the successful black businessmen lived in our neighborhoods.... It was a good intermix of poor and, I guess, middle class and so called ‘upper class’ blacks in the same neighborhood.”⁴⁴

While the neighborhoods usually had their own grocery store and perhaps another business or two, a trip downtown was still welcome. Muriel Desmuke recalled, “Mama liked to go to the movies.... We’d walk to the movie, which was probably about a mile and a half from where we lived in Muskogee. At the time there was a black theatre called the Grand Theatre. We would go almost every week.”⁴⁵ The Grand, built in 1904 as a vaudeville house, made the change to movie theater later.⁴⁶ Black people did not go east of the tracks, though, according to Preston Reed. However, downtown along 2nd Street there were many African American businesses to choose from: Gentry Jewelry, several clothes cleaners, barbershops, tailor shops, Dowlin Shoe Repair, and the Elliotts’ department stores.⁴⁷ Mac’s Bar, according to Desmuke, had the best burger anywhere.⁴⁸ Porter Reed remembered there were four black cafes and a drugstore about two blocks from the depot. At the Main and Denison intersection there was the DeLuxe Hall, a second-floor dance hall, and there was the Grand Hall on South 2nd Street. Well-known black entertainers performed in Muskogee from the pre-World War II period into the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Interview of Muriel Desmuke, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, MAAHOHP.

⁴⁶ Roger Bell, *Images of America: Muskogee* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2011), n.p.

⁴⁷ Interview of Porter Reed, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, MAAHOHP.

⁴⁸ Interview of Muriel Desmuke, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, *ibid.*

1960s—Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and later, Ike and Tina Turner, and Little Richard.⁴⁹

Sports were always popular in Muskogee's African American community. Athletics was an important part of the Manual education and had enthusiastic support from the black community. Baseball, basketball, football—even Golden Gloves boxing—drew fans. However, there was also a semi-pro baseball team from Muskogee in the Negro League. They played in the Athletic Park between 4th and 5th streets with its entrance on Boston Street.⁵⁰ Lansing Lee remembered the Saturday or Sunday games as part of community life. “The little park was right down from the house and across from a baseball field where the Negro League would play.... [W]e would take our blankets down to the park.... My mother would always have lemonade or sandwiches and stuff and we sat on those blankets and watched the game. I had some of the greatest times of my life. It was a sharing time.... [W]e could yell for the team and everybody seemed to be friends....”⁵¹

One of the sports facilities Muskogee's black citizens were not allowed to visit was the Natatorium, the city swimming pool in Spaulding Park. Black children swam in a muddy pond, and the number of drownings was alarming. In the mid-1930s, however, the ladies of the Matron's Club—Mrs. T. J. Elliott, Mrs. H. L. Muckleroy, Mrs. Walter Cox, Mrs. Elnora Riley, Mrs. Susan Sharp, Mrs. H. E. Tollett, Mrs. Samuel Sadler, and Mrs. Ted Ragsdale, Sr.—led the campaign to create a park with a swimming pool for their community. The site chosen was near Manual and bounded by Altamont, North 4th Street, and Tamaroa Street. Named Elliott Park, it included the swimming pool, a playground, and a pavilion built by the Works Progress

⁴⁹ Interview of Porter Reed, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *A Proud Past*, II, 41, 98; Ledbetter, *Alliance Against the Odds*, vol. 2, 93.

⁵¹ Interview of Lansing Lee, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, MAAHOHP.

Administration. Although the pool has been replaced today by a water park, Elliott Park retains much of its 1930s character.⁵²

In many ways, Muskogee's African American community was shut out of the town's economic and social life; however, they shared the national changes that occurred through the first half of the twentieth century. The oil and natural gas boom that began about the time of Oklahoma statehood and extended through the 1920s brought wealth (and sometimes great trouble) to Creek Indian allottees such as Katie Fixico and Jackson Barnett. It could also bring much turmoil and trouble to African Creek allotment owners, sometimes targeted by predatory oil men, attorneys, and "guardians." One member of Muskogee's African American community who created a fortune in the oil business was Jake Simmons, Jr. Descended from Cow Tom, an important nineteenth century Creek freedman, and the son of a prosperous Creek freedman rancher, Jake Jr. was also a Creek allottee. Persuaded by Booker T. Washington to attend Tuskegee Institute, he graduated in 1919. By the 1920s he was in the eastern Oklahoma oil business. With the decline of that business during the 1930s Great Depression, he focused on real estate, selling eastern Oklahoma farmlands to oil-wealthy East Texas African Americans. He built a large Eclectic home at 402 North 17th Street in the Founder's Place area. A forceful, outspoken person, he was an opponent of segregation and in 1938 it was he who brought about the law suit, *Simmons v. Muskogee Board of Education*, under his wife's name.⁵³

The 1940s, however, brought Muskogee and its African American community better times. In 1941-1942 the *Muskogee, Oklahoma Negro City Directory* published by the Commercial Club proudly announced that the Muskogee-Taft area served a black population of

⁵² A Proud Past, II, 61; Ellen "Cowboy" Collins Johnson, "The Elliott and Ragsdale Families of Indian Territory," *Rivers Historian: A Journal of the Three Rivers Museum* 4 (Spring 2001, number 2): 6, 8.

⁵³ Larry O'Dell, "Jake Simmons, Jr. (1901-1981)," *Oklahoma Historical Society's Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <<http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/s/si004.html>> (June 15, 2014).

about 15,000. “Educationally and intellectually, it has been said that Muskogee Negroes enjoy a prestige [sic] unequaled anywhere else in America.” The directory continued, “As one old timer recently remarked, there’s more Negro lawyers, doctors, realtors, etc. to the square foot in Muskogee than there is anywhere else in the world.” The text went on to say that politically the black population had made “great progress.” By constituting a quarter of the city’s population, they could swing elections with their ballots and had the ability to use them, a marvel to recent black immigrants from southern states. The writer lauded the black schools and thirty-four black churches. In addition to providing business addresses by category, it also listed ten black women’s civic clubs and ten federated clubs.⁵⁴

Still, just as the directory appeared, the nation was thrown into World War II. Young men and women, black and white, went to war, leaving others to pick up the slack at home. Construction soon began on Camp Gruber not far to the southeast near Braggs, Oklahoma. It was to be a training facility for American troops and a prison camp for German prisoners of war, most from Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s Afrika Korps. The camp opened on May 12, 1942. The American troops stationed at the camp came to Muskogee, the closest large town, on leave, and residents made them welcome in businesses and homes. A WAC detachment stationed at Camp Gruber was made up of black female troops, while black soldiers are said to have used the building today known as the Martin Luther King Center at 627 North 3rd Street as a USO hall. The population of Muskogee, which had remained steady for years at about 40,000, surged to 50,000 with the wartime activity, in spite of a 1943 flood and a 1945 tornado.⁵⁵

The 1950s saw segregation begin to crumble with the integration of the military during the Truman administration and significant Oklahoma cases that resulted in the desegregation of

⁵⁴ *Negro City Directory, 1941-1942*, 9.

⁵⁵ Janet Allen, “Camp Gruber: The War Years,” Three Rivers Museum, <<http://www.3riversmuseum.com/camp-gruber-the-war-years.html>> (June 15, 2014); *A Proud Past*, II, 128.

higher education facilities. The landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954 is generally viewed as the national turning point. Muskogee citizens were divided on the question of desegregating schools. White opposition was strong, but the NAACP, led by Jake Simmons, called for integration.⁵⁶ By the 1960s desegregation was the law, for better or worse.

Questioned about it in 2009, some African Americans from Muskogee who lived during those earlier days and continue to live with the results had some negative opinions. Porter Reed said, “We asked for integration and we got it. The government passed it. The first thing they did in Muskogee, they tore out all the black schools.... [With Manual Training High School] we turned out doctors [and] lawyers. There’s no black doctors turned out in this town any more.... [W]e asked for the wrong thing. We didn’t need integration. We should have asked for equal opportunities.”⁵⁷

Asked how the black community felt when Manual closed, Ben Noble of Antioch Baptist Church replied, “Oh, we were sick, we were sick. And we’re still sick. We hurt. We hurt because the pride is gone.... Most of the teachers at Manual, they knew the background of a kid....that teacher knew how to take that kid and bring them up....”⁵⁸

Muriel Desmuke agreed, “I’m pretty sure some people think that the so-called integration was a good plan, but it still hurt us because in our schools we had our black teachers....most of the teachers have been purged from the system, especially our black males, so we don’t have that type of guidance for our kids.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ledbetter, *Alliance Against the Odds*, 71.

⁵⁷ Interview of Porter Reed, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, MAAHOHP.

⁵⁸ Interview of Ben Noble, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Interview of Muriel Desmuke, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, *ibid.*

Vernell Redo, born about 1941, agreed, “....the town was abounding with lots of leadership at the time...all adults were your leaders because they all had permission to discipline you in whatever the situation might be....”⁶⁰

Asked about Muskogee when he arrived in Muskogee in 1955 compared to 2009, Sam Noble said, “Then people had a lot of pride. And we had sections. We had the south end, we had the west side, we had Reeves Addition, [and] we had the central zone. And we had leaders in all those areas. And you had men that had something. They were businessmen.” He continued, “We had our own church, we had our own schools, and you had to hang together....The teacher, the preacher, and the police department ...we all worked together.... So what they call integration was good, but in a way, it’s set us back. See, we lost that self-help....When you left Manual Training High School, if you took advantage of what was offered, you were prepared to make a living.... You could make it.”⁶¹

Some still looked longingly back to the first half of the 20th century. Vernell Redo remembered, “We just loved downtown, and there was everything going on down there that we wanted...[G]rowing up, there was very few things that I had to leave the black community for because there were all types of businessmen, all types of stores, and just about all you ever needed you could find from somewhere up and down Third Street through Second, all the way to Kalamazoo here in Muskogee.”⁶²

By the second half of the century conditions in Muskogee were changing. What had not changed was the continuation of black enterprise. The *Muskogee Black Business Directory*, issued about that time, had page after page of entries: plumbers, general contractors, food

⁶⁰ Interview of Vernell Redo, September 4, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, *ibid.*

⁶¹ Interview of Sam Noble, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, *ibid.*

⁶² Interview of Vernell Redo, September 4, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, *ibid.*

services, realtors, janitorial services, cab companies, photographers, and nursing homes. The last enterprise filled a niche much as had the funeral homes at the turn of the century. The McIntosh family first used the lower floor of their Queen Anne Style house at 601 North 24th Street for elderly clients and immediately received requests for additional beds. They subsequently moved to other locations, including 2100 North Martin Luther King Street.⁶³

In 2009 an interviewer asked Vernell Redo, a realtor, how Muskogee had changed over the years. He responded, “Dramatically.” The cause, according to Redo was “the coming of the mall. That disrupted the black community as I knew it and literally destroyed downtown Muskogee.”⁶⁴ Arrowhead Mall stretches from Main Street to North 6th Street and from Denison Avenue to Martin Luther King Street. It replaced a black neighborhood and spilled over into the historically black business district downtown. Cedric Johnson, though, born in 1932, added that the grocery store chains had a large role in driving the neighborhood groceries out of business.⁶⁵

By mid-century and with the coming of desegregation, the strong sense of neighborhood seemed to disappear. In the following decades African Americans who could afford it moved up to “sugar hill” as they called the formerly affluent all-white neighborhoods on the west side. Not all black neighborhoods were gone, but the feeling of community that had helped sustain them was damaged if not gone, according to some who lived through the change.

Conclusion

One does not have to look long or hard to identify abundant remnants of Muskogee’s African American heritage that are worth marking. In spite of time, change, and neglect, they persist. Early twentieth century houses, a pre-World War II commercial building, and two

⁶³ Charles Perkins, *Muskogee Black Business Directory* (n.p., n.d.). Information provided by Margaret McIntosh Taylor during the course of this project.

⁶⁴ Interview of Vernell Redo, September 4, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, MAAHOHP.

⁶⁵ Interview of Cedric Johnson, September 3, 2009, Muskogee, Oklahoma, *ibid*.

venerable churches line South 3rd Street north of West Southside Boulevard. Altamont Street north from Martin Luther King Street to Elliott Park is lined with early twentieth century houses, a neighborhood grocery store, and a World War I-era church—all facing Sadler Arts Academy, virtually unchanged since its opening in 1953. On Eleventh Street between Court and Denison streets, early twentieth century homes of some of the leading families in African American Muskogee still stand. The “Y” at Emporia Street, 21st Street, and Martin Luther King Street still has three mid-twentieth century businesses, several homes, and the 1929 Wheatley School. Many of these resources are in poor condition from lack of funds or neglect but could be repaired and/or reclaimed from decay or overgrown vegetation. In fact, early twentieth century homes associated with Muskogee’s African American community are too numerous to count. Some are vernacular, but many are truly fine examples of their style. Sadler Arts Academy is only one such resource in a potential district worthy of a National Register nomination.

Annotated List of Selected Resources

REEVES ADDITION

1. Macedonia Baptist Church

418 West Shawnee Avenue

Built in 1914, this church was surveyed in “Black Protestant Churches of Muskogee.” It is a one-story rectangular building of buff brick that combines Art Deco and Spanish Colonial Revival elements. There is a four-sided tower topped by a steep roof on each front corner. A stepped parapet between the towers has an inset letter M. Inset glass block crosses flank a glass block window above new double doors. Single stained glass windows flank the doors and windows on the sides. Brick buttresses brace the side walls. Extensions on the rear and east side maintain the character of the building. It is in good condition and is National Register-worthy.

2. Whispering Pines Apartments

Mt. Calvary Street and Spruce Avenue

The two-story, hipped roof, wood apartment buildings were the first financed by a church.

3. Tut’s Blue Moon Cafe

Northeast corner of North Chicago Street and Shawnee Avenue

Two Craftsman-style buildings are combined end to end in this plain but well-known nightspot. The Blue Moon has gable roofs, concrete block walls, single windows, and single entrances on the west and south elevations.

4. Stewart’s Diner

Southwest corner of Spruce Avenue and Shawnee Avenue

A c. 1940 Craftsman-style building, Stewart’s Diner is one-story with a gabled roof, concrete block walls, and single windows and doors. The northeast corner of the building is recessed to provide a patio-entrance, and there is a boarded-over pass-through window on the south end. A sign overhead reads, “Take a bite out of this soul food.”

5. St. Luke’s Baptist Church

1624 Miller Street

Built in 1917, this well-maintained U-shaped church at the corner of Reeves Street has concrete block walls and two entrances. It has undergone some updating, but exposed rafter tails recall its early 20th century origin.

OLD AGENCY NEIGHBORHOOD

6. Trinity Masonic Lodge

Northwest corner of Military Boulevard and North 24th Street

A plain one-story, end-gabled concrete block building, the lodge is c. 1950. It has double doors and windows on the south elevation and a single door on the east. It is one of two black Masonic lodges in Muskogee, the other being M. W. Prince Hall Grand Lodge at 1304 West Broadway Avenue.

7. Retaining wall at the Veterans Administration facility on Agency Hill

Buffalo Drive near the parking lot

Brick mason Perry Lawson McIntyre (McEntire) laid the stone for this sandstone retaining wall on east side of the parking lot.

8. Sunny Acres Nursing Home

2116 and 2118 North 40st Street

The second McIntosh nursing home, Sunny Acres, c. 1950, is a one-story, L-shaped, gable-roofed building generally in the Craftsman style. It had a 26-bed capacity. The McIntosh family lived next door in 2116.

9. Booker T. Washington Cemetery

Southeast corner of Fern Mountain Road and U.S. Highway 69

While most black cemeteries have been outside the Muskogee city limits, this large, old cemetery is inside. Markers range from very small to large, and there are a number of mausoleums. Some markers give burial dates in the first decade of the 1900s.

“Y” NEIGHBORHOOD

10. Wheatley Elementary School

2208 Martin Luther King Boulevard

Built in 1929, this red brick, one-story Commercial-style school building has a flat roof and complex footprint that incorporates multiple entrances and later additions. It is in poor condition but National Register-worthy.

11. McIntosh Nursing Home

2100 Martin Luther King Street

This McIntosh Nursing Home at the intersection of Military Boulevard and Martin Luther King Street is a large L-shaped, one-story building, with the longer leg facing south. It is generally Craftsman in style. It has a gable roof and concrete block walls. A series of double windows with red shutters indicate individual rooms. A front-facing gable, small porch with wrought iron pillars mark the primary entrance. The east end includes a two-story addition. It is fair condition but currently not in use.

12. Margaret McIntosh Taylor Home

2020 Martin Luther King Street

A former 1950s laundromat, this rectangular building has been converted into a residence. It has an end-gabled roof, concrete block and brick walls, three doors, and multiple-light windows. It is in good condition.

13. Ernest Edwards Barber Shop

2101 Emporia (intersection of 21st Street, Martin Luther King Street, and Emporia Street)
Ernest Edwards Barber Shop is a plain rectangular, one-story, gable-roofed concrete-block building with a brick veneer façade. Generally Craftsman in style, it appears to date from the 1940s and is in good condition.

14. Stella's Beautitorium

2103 Emporia Street

A 1950s-era one-story, flat-roofed, generally-rectangular concrete block building, this beauty shop has been in business for decades. The building was originally a hamburger drive-in. It has side entrances and a centered front show window with smaller side windows facing Martin Luther King Street. It is in good condition.

15. House

2000 Martin Luther King Street

This small wood-frame rental property, currently vacant, dates from the 1950s. It has a gable roof that extends over a small centered porch, wood siding, and a concrete foundation. It is in poor condition.

16. Jessie Mae McIntyre Stovall McIntosh Home

601 North 20th Street

The entrance to this c. 1945 Craftsman house is on North 20th Street. It has a gabled roof with a gabled front porch and rear addition that includes a garage. The walls are wood siding above a brick base. It is in fair condition.

17. House

605 North 20th Street

This house, c. 1945 and also associated with the Jessie Mae Stovall and the McIntosh family, has a side-gabled roof, wood siding, and sections of brick-patterned siding. The front porch is set to the south end on a concrete block base. It is in poor condition.

18. Walter Coleman House

609 North 20th Street

The Coleman House is a c. 1950 Minimal Traditional house. It has a side gabled roof and brick walls, but a single garage on the south end is front gabled. The house is in fair condition but currently empty.

TERRACE PLACE NEIGHBORHOOD

19. Janey Banks Robertson Home

532 Terrace Place

Banks, founder of Muskogee's Head Start Program, lived in this mid-20th century house. It has stone veneer and a basic U-shape with the wraparound corner windows popular in the 1950s. There appears to be a garage extension on the west.

20. Judge Cecil Robertson Home

526 Terrace Place

"La Casa Colina," a two-story brick house, is typical of the Monterey style popular from about 1925 to 1940. It has a tile roof, second-story wood balcony, and an arched front door. A brick wall completes the suggestion of Spanish-Mexican influence.

21. Olietta Thomas Home

508 Terrace Place

The Thomas house, owned by a Muskogee 2nd Street businesswoman, is a c. 1960 Contemporary house. It is stone-veneered and has a low hipped roof, two-car garage, and band of windows on the south elevation.

22. The Rudy Jenkins Home

504 Terrace Place

Businessman Rudy Jenkins owned this house, which resembles the four-square plan in its pyramid roof, centered roof dormer vent, and evenly spaced windows. However, it has an off-centered entry, 1950s-style windows, and a two-car garage on the east elevation.

23. Residence

601 North 24th Street

The c. 1910 residence at this address is wood, one and one-half stories high with steep front-facing dormers and two entries onto a wrap-around porch on the southeast corner. The McIntosh family lived on the upper floor of the home in the mid-1900s and operated Muskogee's first nursing home for black patients on the lower floor.

24. Little Rose Baptist Church

2332 Findlay Avenue

The present c. 1940 church building post-dates an earlier Little Rose Church at 706 North 26th Street. The main portion of the current building is rectangular and oriented toward the south with

two rear additions. There is a tall entry topped by an open belfry. The building has a concrete foundation and, asbestos siding, and a gabled roof.

25. Residence

2321 Denison Street

This c. 1930s one and one-half story Tudor Revival house was the home of Boston Russell, first band director at Manual School, and wife Christine Bouleware, a social worker. The brick and wood-sided house has two entries and an unusual oriel window on the north elevation.

26. Chauncy Twine Home

324 North 11th Street

A one and one-half story Colonial Revival house, c. 1920, this was the home of prominent businessman Chauncy Twine. It has a side-gabled roof, brick chimneys and foundation, and wood-siding. There is a one-story sunroom on the left, balanced by a porte cochere on the right. A flat-roofed porch with concrete columns is centered on the front. Windows are paired or in bands of four. The house appears National Register-worthy.

27. Samuel Sadler Home

305 North 11th Street

Samuel Sadler, principal of Sadler Junior High School, and his wife, the daughter of T. J. Elliott, lived in this c.1915 airplane bungalow. It has a hipped roof on the airplane section with multiple gables on the first story and porte-cochere. The walls have wide siding, and the foundation is brick. The porch supports are wood on stucco trapezoidal bases. This house appears National Register-worthy.

28. T. J. Elliott Home

301 North 11th Street

Well-known Muskogee merchant T. J. Elliott lived in this two-and-one-half story Prairie Style house. Built c. 1915, it has a hipped roof and dormers, both gabled and hipped. A porch with pyramidal supports extends across the front and shelters the front door. There is a one-story sunroom on the east elevation and a two-story bay on the west elevation. Foundations and chimneys are sandstone. The house appears to be National Register-worthy.

29. The Thomas-Foreman Home (National Register 1973)

1419 West Okmulgee Avenue

The small one-story rectangular building on the southwest corner of the property housed Dr. Thomas J. Pressley (born 1899). The Foremans encouraged him, while he worked for them as a student at Manual Training High School, to attend college. In later life he gave up his profession of dentistry to care for the Foremans until their deaths. The c. 1910 house is one-story with an end-gabled roof. It has three doors and an extension on the east. Built of wood, it was later veneered with corrugated red clay tile.

SADLER NEIGHBORHOOD

30. Mt. Calvary Baptist Church

626 Girard Street

Built in 1914, Mt. Calvary Baptist Church (then the Second Baptist Church) is a gable-roofed rectangular building with a semi-exposed basement. The church is predominantly red brick. The front (south) elevation has red brick in the gable, along with a triple window. Four stripes of red brick against a buff brick background create the effect of temple pillars. A replacement double door is set at the top of flights of steps down toward either side. Above the door is a cross of glass blocks set into the wall and between single windows. A two-story educational wing at the rear was added in 1946. The church, included in the “Black Protestant Churches of Muskogee” study, is in good repair and is eligible for the National Register.

31. Mt. Calvary Heritage House

628 Girard Street

Just north of Mt. Calvary Heritage House, a church museum is housed in a plain c. 1960 former residence. It is a one-story gable-roofed, L-shaped brick house with a single door and a two-car garage.

32. Mackey’s Detail and Auto Sales

Northeast corner of North 4th Street and Martin Luther King Boulevard

Originally a Sinclair Service Station, c. 1935, it is a one-story rectangular Craftsman-style building with a carport recalling the days when it had gasoline pumps. The gable roof is metal, and the walls are brick, still wearing the white and dark green Sinclair colors. There are two service bays on the east end, while the west end provides sales space.

33. Samuel L. Sadler Arts Academy

800 Altamont Street

The large International Style school, dedicated in 1953 as a junior high school, was near the Manual Training High School. Still in use today, it is unchanged except for a patio area added to the north end. It is built of buff brick and is two or three stories tall by section. It has flat roofs at varying levels and maintains strong horizontal lines in bands of windows. The building is National Register-worthy.

34. Metropolitan Baptist Church

827 Altamont Street

Built c. 1915, this plain Craftsman church is one story with a front gabled roof, narrow wood siding, and a stone foundation. It has replacement double doors and metal supports for the small gabled porch roof. There is an extension on the back.

35. Taylor Grocery

Corner of Tower Hill Boulevard and Altamont Street

One of several Taylor Groceries in Muskogee, the building on the southwest corner of Tower Hill Boulevard and Altamont Street is a simple flat-roofed commercial building of no particular style. It is built of concrete blocks and has a flat roof with a stepped parapet on the front elevation. A single door with a flat awning is set off-center between two small display windows. These openings are now boarded over.

36. Elliott Park

Bounded by Tamaroa Street on the north, Spruce Street and North 4th Street on the east, the Sadler Arts Academy campus on the south, and Iola Street and Tower Hill Boulevard on the south and west.

Dedicated in 1935, Elliott Park retains its character if not the swimming pool that was its reason for creation. Historical features include an open-sided picnic pavilion of cut and ashlar sandstone, a memorial bench, and a walking trail built by the WPA.

NORTHSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD

37. Peabody Bradley Home

1010 Martin Luther King Street

Owner of the Bradley Taxi Company and Muskogee's first black police department detective, Peabody Bradley lived in this two and one-half story Prairie Style house built about 1915. It has a hipped roof, with gabled and hipped dormers. The entrance is set on the left side under a full-width porch resting on round columns. There is an additional gable over the entry. The walls are covered in wood siding painted blue, and the house rests on a concrete foundation. Shutters have been added to the windows.

38. Jake Simmons, Jr. Home

402 North 17th Street

This large c. 1930 one-of-a-kind house was the home of oil man Jake Simmons, Jr. It combines design elements of the Tudor, French Eclectic, and Mission styles with its large asymmetrical gables, arched porches, mullioned windows, and stucco walls. It is in good condition and appears to be National Register-worthy.

39. M. W. Prince Hall Grand Lodge

Free Masons of Oklahoma

(Oklahoma Prince Hall Grand Lodge)

1304 West Broadway Avenue

The Masonic lodge is a flat-roofed, rectangular brick building, c. 1960. It has a concrete cap around the roofline, a single door and sidelight beneath a flat awning at the south elevation entrance with a bank of fixed windows. The building is in good condition.

40. Praise Center Family Church

302 North 7th Street

Praise Center Family Church is a 1920s-era Spanish Colonial Revival building. It is one-story with a semi-exposed basement. A small canopy connects it to a concrete block annex on the north, which maintains the style of the main building. Elaborate parapets decorate the ends and side center of the gabled roof, as well as the entrances from North 7th Street. Buttresses support the side elevations. The building is in good condition and is National Register-worthy. This building is not listed in the *Negro Directory, 1941-1942* and could possibly have been a white church. Its current minister is African American.

41. Josephine Apartment Building

332 North 7th Street

This two-story building appears to accommodate at least four apartments, two up and two down. Side windows with arched lintels suggest it may date to c. 1910 but had a new front applied about 1920. Side walls are red brick, while the front has buff brick with decorative Art Deco details and banisters. There is an open full-width porch on both levels, and “JOSHEPHINE” is spelled out in a name plate on the second floor front. The front gable of the low-pitched roof has newer siding. The building is in fair condition.

42. Sinclair Gas Station

501 North 7th Street at Emporia Avenue

This small square building, c. 1930, sits at a right angle to the corner to accommodate vehicle traffic from both streets. Brick columns at each corner support the tile pyramid roof. There is a single door facing the corner. Otherwise, the sides are now board and batten with small boarded windows flanking the door. The roof is crowned with a square cupola. Only one of the mirrored sides of the cupola is still in place. This rare building is in poor condition but is National Register-worthy.

43. Spencer United Methodist Church

543 North 7th Street

Spencer United Methodist Church, built in 1928, is a rectangular red brick building with a front-gabled roof and semi-exposed basement. The main entry faces North 7th Street and is flanked by original stained glass windows. A tall flight of steps leads to new metal double doors set into a large bank of decorative rectangular windows with a centered cross. Brick mason Perry Lawson McIntyre (McEntire) laid the brick on this building.

44. Granger Winn Funeral Home

812 Emporia Street

Historically the Emporia Granger Funeral Home, this two-story Neoclassical building, c. 1925, has a front-facing gable with a two-story porte-cochere extension on the east side. There are inset porches across the second-story front, with a smaller porch across the ground-floor of the house. The foundation and porte-cochere supports are red brick; however, lower floor porch supports are wrought iron. There is an extension on the rear, and a canopy covers the steps and walkway to the front entrance.

45. The Fish Hut (Liz's Barbeque, Dairy Mist)

452 Martin Luther King Street

Perched on the corner of Martin Luther King Street and North 4th Street is a small rectangular, one-story concrete block building with a partial brick façade. It has a flat roof with a deteriorated c. 1950 neon sign. The roof overhang, patio, service window, and picnic tables show that it has served fast food for several decades. The original owner was Muskogee attorney and businessman Chauncey Twine.

46. Martin Luther King Center

627 North 3rd Street

Constructed in the mid-1940s by German prisoners of war held at nearby Camp Gruber, the current Martin Luther King Center is a flat-roofed, one-story Commercial Style building. The walls are buff brick. The entry on the south has been altered, and there is a large addition on the west. The building is in good condition.

SOUTHSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD

47. Assumption Church and Parsonage

540 South 3rd Street

Now a headstart center, Assumption Church, c. 1915, is a dark red brick Classical Revival building with a stone foundation, triple entrances, wide cornices, and decorative double arched windows. The parsonage, on the north, is a two-story, Prairie style house of matching stone and brick but with a dormer window and a wide porch with small double column supports. The buildings are in good condition and eligible for the National Register.

48. Joe Kermitt Robertson Home

607 South 3rd Street

Robertson was a master carpenter. His home is simple early Craftsman with a centered front porch and a shed-roofed rear extension.

49. House

611 South 3rd Street

This house, c. 1920, is a good example of the Craftsman style with exposed rafter tails, original narrow siding, and bungalow porch supports with tapered wood uppers on brick columns.

50. Rosetta Alpha Nesbitt Home

624 South 3rd Street

Rosetta Alpha Nesbitt, a beautician, lived at this address. The house combines pyramidal and craftsman features and has a rear extension. It is in fair condition.

51. Life Inc. Senior Adult Day Care Center

701 South 3rd Street

This one-story commercial building, c. 1920, is concrete block and has a gable-roof. The red-brick façade is decorated with white inserts along the sides and above the double front entrance set between plate glass windows. It is in good condition.

52. Warner Apartment Building

715 South 3rd Street

This apartment building, c. 1910, has two stories. It has a hipped roof with a dormer and name plate on the front elevation, which is buff brick. The rest of the building is red brick. Some side windows have shallow arched lintels, while others are flat. There is a one-story porch on the lower front. The building is in poor condition.

53. Full Counsel Muskogee

Northwest corner of South 3rd Street and West Southside Boulevard

Formerly a Lutheran Church, this building, c. 1925, is rectangular and has a gable roof, front steeple, wide siding, tall windows along the sides, and a small open porch on the east. It is in good condition.

54. Evangelist Temple Baptist Church

115 West Southside Boulevard

Formerly a commercial building, c. 1910, repurposed as a church, has a name plate at the roofline with the wording "A V Jordan." The building once housed the radio station of Reverend Strawbridge, a musician. It is two-story with a flat roof and stepped parapet. Show windows on the north elevation were filled and the whole painted white. There are paired windows above a single door. The new double entrance is in a later gabled extension on the rear.

55. House

629 South 2nd Street

This small, simple craftsman house is believed to be the home of George and Mary Elliott of the prominent Elliott family of businessmen. It is in poor condition.

56. The Doyle McCormick Home

607 South 2nd Street

The two-story four-square house belonged to John Doyle, a livery stable and funeral home owner. The house has a small bay centered on the front elevation with four simple columns on the first floor. It is in fair condition and has been recognized by Muskogee Historic Preservation Program.

57. Porter Reed Home, number 1

809 South 3rd Street

Black baseball legend Porter Reed grew up in this home and played ball in the park across the street. The house is a wood frame, one-story pyramid house, circa 1910, with a smaller Craftsman addition, circa 1930, and shed-roofed addition on the rear.

58. Porter Reed Home, number 2

554 South 7th Street

Baseball legend Porter Reed currently lives in this two-story National Folk house. L-shaped with a gabled roof and inset porch, it has newer siding and is in good condition.

59. Beebe C.M.E. Church

700 South 7th Street

Parsonage

698 South 7th Street

Originally located at 500 (now 700) South 7th Street, this is a newer version outside the parameters of this study. The Parsonage at 698 South 7th Street, however, is adjacent and original to the church. It is a one-story National Folk house with a pyramid roof, original siding, a porch insert on the north, and a shed-roofed carport on the south.

60. Homes Funeral Home

2103 Estelle Avenue

The former Homes Funeral Home is a large c. 1910 Queen Anne house. The two and one-half story brick house is L-shaped and sits on a stone foundation. It has a hipped roof with a gabled wing and hipped dormers. Lower windows and some upper windows have stone sills and lintels. A porch resting on simple round columns wraps around the northeast corner. The main entrance has sidelights and a transom, while a single entrance directly above suggests there was once an upper porch as well. There is a mid-1900s one-story concrete block garage and work area on the

rear. The house is in poor condition due to roof damage but is currently being repaired. Much of the original fine interior woodwork is still intact.

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