The Upshaws of County Line, Nacogdoches—Monel and Leota Upshaw and their thirteen children, descendants of freedmen who established County Line, or the Upshaw Community, in the 1870s
(Photo by Richard Orton of Austin from his exhibit “The Upshaws of County Line”)
TEXAS FREEDMEN’S SETTLEMENTS IN THE NEW SOUTH

by Thad Sitton of Austin

For the last year, James H. Conrad and I have been engaged in research about Texas freedmen’s settlements. These were independent black rural communities usually established within twenty years after the end of slavery. We currently know of several hundred of these dispersed rural communities, few of which were ever incorporated, or platted, or even properly listed on county maps. These were “unofficial” places by their very nature—some so much so that the high sheriff and the census man only rarely intruded in their affairs.¹

Southerners called such places “settlements,” whether black people or white people lived in them. Settlements have been neglected, or misunderstood, by Southern rural historians, Frank Owsley once argued in his book, Plain Folk of the Old South (1949). Even in the heydays of such settlements, a traveler might pass through one without even noticing that a community was there. Infrastructure was slight, and it might be scattered about at different locations in the dispersed community. Almost always there was a church, or churches, and a school; almost always there was a grist mill and a cane mill on someone’s place to produce the community’s survival staples of cornmeal and cane syrup; rather often, there was a small cotton gin, sometimes of the multiple-use category that also ground corn and sawed limber. And sometimes there was a community post office, though perhaps with a name change. As a general rule, when the larger white society intruded
on a freedmen’s settlement with a post office, railroad depot, or major sawmill, the black community got a new name, whether it wanted one or not.

Communities often renamed themselves for internal reasons or used more than one name at the same time. Considering how unofficial they were, no wonder that many freedmen’s settlements ended up with multiple names—that in Cherokee County “Hog Jaw” became “Sweet Union” and “Andy” became “Cuney.” In Goliad County, one community became successively known as The Colony, Perdido, Centerville, Ira, and Cologne, the name used in The New Handbook of Texas.²

In any case, the names alone almost justify the hunt for freedmen’s settlements. Several of the state’s “Bethlehems” are freedmen’s settlements, and all three of its “Nazareths.” Scattered across the eastern half of Texas are Green Hill, Yellow Prairie, Red Branch, Black Branch, Weeping Mary, Board Bottom, Jerusalem, Freedmen’s Ridge, Egypt, Frog, Elm Slough, and my personal favorite name, Lost Ball.

Some important patterns of social history show up in the names. The common use of place names from the Bible and the word “chapel” emphasizes how many settlements began with establishment of rural churches. The words “sand,” “creek,” “branch,” “slough,” and “bottom” are common components of settlement place names, suggesting locations on less-than-ideal cotton soils in sand hills and flood-prone creek and river bottoms, a generalization supported by a close study of the map. Even more interesting, the word “colony” also commonly occurs in settlement names—for example, Peyton Colony, Saint John’s Colony, Grant’s Colony, and so on—and it is reasonable to ask what community founders thought was being colonized? The wilderness? White rural society? Both at the same time? I think both at the same time.

The names come and go from our master list as additional information arrives, and no wonder: it was complicated out there in the postbellum Texas countryside, and we labor not to call a fish a fowl. Perhaps after moving around for a brief while to test their
newfound freedom, many former slaves signed on as wage-hands or sharecroppers with their former masters, or with neighbors of their former masters, and sometimes these sharecropper communities grew large enough to take names. Other freed persons moved into satellite communities adjacent to, or very close by, existing white towns, and these “quarters” also took names. Often in the beginning, before the white towns grew around them and converted them into neighborhoods, some of these urban quarters were geographically separated from their parent communities and somewhat resembled the independent black settlements of the remote countryside. For example, at Clarksville, now a mixed-race neighborhood of west central Austin, well within the ring of city development, freedmen once had run their own affairs in church and school, separated by a buffer of wooded hills and bad roads from Anglo Austin. At least some of Clarksville’s early residents chose to remain aloof from white society, relying instead upon small cotton patches, big gardens, and a menagerie of domestic livestock to make a living. Some of Austin’s dot-com executives now dwell in $600,000 homes where poor black families once ranged chickens in the yards and rooter hogs in the creek bottoms.3

Although plenty of betwixt-and-between places existed to confuse the historian, it is fair to generalize that freed people moved into three general sorts of communities after emancipation: sharecropper quarters, town quarters, and independent freedmen’s settlements, where some or most of the settlers were landowners. My discussion focuses on this third sort of place. Furthermore, it seems high time to do so. Despite their historical importance, and for reasons I don’t entirely understand, freedmen’s settlements have been woefully neglected in the historiography of the New South.

If you try to answer the simple question, “What happened to African Americans after emancipation?” and turn to the literature, you will find a good many works of scholarship analyzing the swift transformation of freedmen into cotton rent farmers, principally sharecroppers. You will note some studies (though surprisingly few) detailing the migration of freed people into newly-formed
“colored quarters” of white towns. And, if you search closely, you will find some accounts of the long-range “exodus” of Southern blacks to the new African-American developer towns of Oklahoma and Kansas, this movement peaking as Democratic “Redemption” loomed on the horizon during the late 1870s. But the story of the internal exodus of former slaves to found remote, independent, landowner communities is yet to be told.4

Where can you go to read a book-length history of such a freedmen’s settlement? I know of only three alternatives and all from out-of-state: William Montell’s *The Saga of Coe Ridge*, Janet Sharp Hermann’s *The Pursuit of a Dream*, and Elizabeth Rauh Bethel’s *Promiseland: A Century of Life in a Negro Community*. Published by Temple University Press in 1981, Bethel’s intimate and detailed study of a South Carolina freedmen’s settlement is by far the most important of these three books. In Texas, Ron Traylor recently completed a master’s thesis study of Barrett’s settlement in Harris County.5 Finally, the wonderful oral autobiography of the late Reverend C. C. White, *No Quittin’ Sense*, edited by Ada Morehead Holland, sheds fascinating light on several Texas freedmen’s communities, including Robinson’s settlement, a few miles east of Nacogdoches.

At this point I’d like to discuss some of my ideas about the social patterns of the origins and essential nature of Texas freedmen’s settlements. But so remote, unofficial, and undocumented were most freedmen’s settlements that generalizations about them may end up always remaining somewhat “beyond the data,” especially since so much of the settlements’ oral history long since has disappeared into the grave.

To understand the origins of the settlements, you have to try to understand the circumstances of freed people during Reconstruction. Historians James Smallwood, Barry Crouch, Laurence Rice, and others have contributed greatly to our recent knowledge of this period, but even more important for me as a white person interpreting black history have been the several hundred personal accounts of slavery, emancipation, and the decades thereafter recorded in the
ten-volume WPA Texas slave narratives edited by George Rawick. To read these accounts is to come as close as anyone can to standing in the freedmen’s shoes.⁶

Circumstances were harsh; options were limited. Most Texas slaves owned nothing beyond the clothing on their backs at the time they learned they were free, and many felt they had no choice but to remain for a time with their former owners in some arrangement of wage-hand or sharecropper peonage. The alternative was to be “turned loose like a bunch of damn hogs in the woods,” one man said. The dream of landowner independence, of “40 acres and a mule” provided by the conquering federal government, died very quickly. For many people, the devil they knew seemed preferable to the devil they didn’t, at least for a time, though a remarkable number of freedmen reported that things changed very little immediately after emancipation. At one large cotton plantation along the Brazos River, disciplinary beatings familiar under slavery continued into the sharecropper-era, though some reforms had taken place. Now, at least, nobody was nailed by his ears face-first to a tree all night for punishment, as had been the custom.⁷

Ex-slaves interviewed during 1937 not infrequently asserted that black people in some ways had been better off during slavery than at present, and in context this seems not so much a favorable opinion of slavery as a bitter commentary on the apartheid society that replaced it. Sharecropping remained a hard row to hoe for many, right down to World War II. Asked what he had done since emancipation, one man told his interviewer: “I was sharecropper. And, White Man, that was when slavery really began.”⁸

Gradually, during the first decade after emancipation, freedmen accumulated property, resources, and knowledge of white society and moved away to what they hoped would be improved circumstances on other white men’s farms, to employment in town, and to their own land, as squatters and landowners. During Reconstruction, the white society they moved into was incredibly dangerous. Barry Crouch, James Smallwood, and other recent historians have mined the correspondence of Freedmen Bureau sub-agents
during the years from 1866 to 1870 to describe just how dangerous. Crouch estimated that at least one percent of black males in Texas age fourteen to forty-five were murdered during Reconstruction. Bureau agents relayed many reports of numerous freedmen bodies discovered in their areas, with federal troops seemingly incapable of stopping the carnage. Students and teachers were attacked on their way to Bureau schools, and blacks were beaten or shot for failing to show proper deference to whites or for just acting like they were free by walking the roads or plowing their own fields.

Some white-on-black violence seemed aimed at subjugating blacks economically and socially and at enforcing the new apartheid. Other violence seemed gratuitous, random, and spur-of-the-moment, fueled by bitterness over loss of the war and loss of human property and emboldened by the refusal of local courts to take action to protect freedmen. An ex-slave from the Hempstead area interviewed by John Henry Faulk in 1941 reported that freedmen had to be careful about sitting on their front porches in the late evening, since passers-by on the road occasionally took recreational pot-shots at them. At some places, outlaws, such as Cullen Davis of Harrison County or the man black people called “Dixie” in Freestone County, murdered so many freedmen and KKK-like organizations became so active in raiding homesteads after dark, that farm families commonly abandoned their houses at dusk for a night in the nearby woods. You hear of this practice of leaving home after dark to take cover from many localities, including Nacogdoches County.9 “White capping,” the generic term blacks used for these nocturnal, terroristic, Klan-like activities, took place all across Texas.

That much is not speculation-unpleasant as it may be to contemplate, conflicting as it does with obsolete earlier interpretations of what happened to black Texans during Reconstruction. But what I have to say from this point becomes more speculative.

A minority of freedmen continued the quest for forty acres and a mule long after they recognized they would have to get these
things for themselves. The only true escape from white violence, economic exploitation, and social domination was landownership in an all-black community physically isolated from whites, these people believed. This impulse to seek independence from whites and self-exclusion from white society gave rise to the freedmen’s settlements. Some people who felt this way left for the new black developer towns in Oklahoma and Kansas, but most relocated only a few miles to some unclaimed local wilderness of swampy bottoms or sand hills.

Anglo-American Southerners often were well aware of freedmen’s migration into patches of local wilderness to make a living by hunting, fishing, foraging, and small-farming, and they usually didn’t like it. For one thing, it meant a loss of needed agricultural labor. One traveler wrote to his wife after crossing the Trinity bottoms in 1875: “All the improvements worth noting are on the prairie, but a ‘free nigger patch,’ with demoralized log-hut, occasionally appears in the low wooded bottoms, where that class mostly live.” Was this man witnessing the origins of a new freedmen’s settlement?

The rise of black landownership and the increase in freedmen’s settlements seem closely linked. Although exact dates of origins often are difficult to establish, most freedmen’s settlements began between 1870 and 1900. During that same time, Texas freedmen farmers owning their own land rose from 1.8 percent of all black farmers in 1870 to 31 percent in 1900—a very great achievement, considering the social and economic factors that worked against black land acquisition.  

Most of this astonishing increase in farm ownership took place in the two decades between 1870 and 1890, during which time black Texas owner-operators increased by almost 1400 percent, nearly doubling the rate of increase in Florida, the next-highest Southern state. Twenty-six percent of black Texas farmers worked their own land by 1890.  

All this black land purchase had required hard dealings against long odds. To buy land, an African-American farmer needed the
money or credit to purchase the land, a white landowner willing to sell it to him, and the tacit agreement of whites in the area to allow him to occupy it. Once a black person broke through these barriers into landownership in a locality, others tended to follow him; once someone had “colonized,” families gravitated to the colony. Not surprisingly, the Texas counties having the largest number of freedmen’s settlements also had the largest percentages of black landowners.

As the disapproving Trinity bottom traveler noted, the impulse for isolation, avoidance of whites, autonomy, and landownership showed up immediately after emancipation when some freedmen moved into areas of unclaimed land as squatters. These squatter lands typically were pockets of wilderness on infertile or often-flooded soils that antebellum cotton agriculture had bypassed—sand hills, pine barrens, post oak belts, and creek and river bottoms. There was a lot of this sort of unsettled land available in 1870, and for a decade or so thereafter. Despite Frederick Jackson Turner’s theory to the contrary, the moving line of the Southern frontier had left behind many internal “frontiers,” where poor settlers continued to pioneer the wilderness for generations.

As in the case of Lewis’s Bend in Refugio County and Evergreen in Titus County, some freedmen’s settlements remained squatter communities until their depopulation in the mid-20th century. Land could be purchased for a small price, or preempted from the state, but to what advantage, many thought. If you had the use of the land already, why buy it and pay taxes on it? Furthermore, many people were Southern stockmen ranging hogs and cattle in the open woods, and this traditional use right on other men’s property made land ownership almost unnecessary. The hogs with your mark in their ears sufficiently staked out your “hog claim.” Let somebody else pay the land taxes.

Land squatting by blacks and whites was far more commonly done and easily accomplished than historians have recognized. In 1887, a scandalized newcomer to southeastern Texas wrote, “The people have been in the habit of using every man’s property as
their own for so many years that they have come to believe that the land has no owners.\textsuperscript{13}

Many other settlements began several years after emancipation, after a freedman, or freedmen, somehow accumulated enough money for land purchase. Strong black leaders with mysterious resources showed up at the origins of many freedmen’s settlements, then other people moved in to build a community around them. The pioneer landowner rented to later-comers, sold land to them, and generally functioned as community patron and benefactor. Perhaps the patron profited from the later-comers, but it was also in his self-interest to facilitate the formation of community. It was lonely out there in the white countryside. Very often, the landowner-based settlements chose the same semi-wilderness settings as the squatter settlements—uncleared forests, sand hills, and river bottoms—areas remote from whites where land was cheap.

As in the case of squatter settlements, many landowner settlements were situated along county lines. Was this because streams, with their affordable, or unclaimed, bottomlands, often formed the boundaries between counties, and because land values generally declined with distance from centrally located courthouse towns? Were county lines also good places to hide out and assume a low profile? Some whites disapproved of black landownership and independent black settlements.

Family members, typically a band of siblings, formed the core pioneers at many settlements. This was true of the County Line (Upshaw) settlement along the Angelina River in western Nacogdoches County, founded by the teenaged Upshaw brothers, Guss, Jim, and Felix, just after emancipation. The Upshaws squatted on wilderness land, then purchased it (perhaps with the aid of their former owner). Other black people purchased land from the Upshaws or became land squatters in the vicinity. Guss and Jim in particular served as community stalwarts for a half century—jacks-of-all-trade who blacksmithe, ground corn, sawmilled, and built hundreds of necessary material things (including even cotton wagons) from scratch.\textsuperscript{14}
Other settlements clustered around a church congregation that pioneered the new land as a group. Early settlers often cooperated in building first-generation log cabins, clearing land, and fencing cultivated fields. Then they cooperated to build the new community’s most important infrastructure—first, the brush arbor, then, the church itself. Such churches also functioned as schools and principal community centers.

White assistance is discernible at the origins of many freedmen communities. How could this be otherwise, when it was so hard for a black person to obtain land? Often, this assistance came from the former slaveholders who sold freedmen land, arranged for them to purchase it from other whites, deeded it to them outright, or simply allowed them squatters’ rights on it. A mixture of altruistic and self-serving motives may be assumed, including the need to locate and stabilize a nearby source of willing agricultural labor, a need for cash after wartime losses of capital, feelings of paternalism and responsibility for former slaves, personal friendships with certain freed persons, and blood relationships with certain freed persons.

Ugly as it was, brutal as it could be, slavery also was the time of a great intimacy between black people and white people in the South, and no one who reads the slave narratives can fail to pay attention to what the former slaves have to say about this. Personal relationships formed during slavery facilitated the origins of many freedmen’s settlements, no doubt about it.¹⁵

So much for origins. What of the long track of the freedmen’s settlements down through time? They remained remote, located at the end of country roads that county commissioners somehow never got around to paving, and most black residents liked it that way. A general caution persisted regarding contacts with unfamiliar white people, and a certain “protective coloration” was maintained. A black farmer who could well afford to paint his house or buy a Model T Ford, might choose not to do so for social reasons. A black man from a settlement visiting the courthouse town on Saturday might choose to dress not in his best Sunday outfit but in
everyday work clothes, overalls and straw hat, so as not to attract unpleasant attention.

Many settlements remained hardscrabble places, where people made a living by small farming, large gardens, chickens in the yard, and hogs and cows on the open range (whatever the official stock law proclaimed). Frugality and recycling were the iron dictums of the Texas countryside, but never more acutely so than at these places. Three anecdotes to illustrate this (which I can duplicate from white sources, incidentally, all except for the detail about the baling wire): C. C. White recalled that people in his community couldn’t afford matches and so kept a succession of stumps burning from which to light household fires; each stump would last the better part of a week. Alice Wilkins remembered that when her family ran out of salt they processed dirt from the smokehouse floor through the lye hopper to make, as she said, “a grey kind of salt.” At the Flat Prairie Settlement of Washington County, Grover Williams’s grandmother commonly made Grover and his brothers “jumper jackets” from worn-out cotton sack ducking, the button-holes fastened with baling wire.

Hunting, fishing, and foraging for wild plant foods remained important for settlement inhabitants long after such things had become recreational activities for people in the towns. Sheriff’s deputies, census takers, county tax officials, and medical doctors only occasionally intruded into the affairs of such places, which self-policied themselves, birthed their children with midwives, buried their own dead, and practiced a high measure of community help-out. Some rural whites resented the clannishness and real or presumed “uppityness” of African Americans in such settlements, and they might go over to harass them when liquored up on Saturday nights. This could be dangerous, however. Blacks in freedmen’s settlements were more inclined to fight back.16

An economic marginality from soil infertility and small farm size often forced quests for other sources of cash and sometimes for outside employments. In the agricultural down-times of the yearly round, settlement people chopped ties for the railroad, sold
firewood in town, peddled farm produce in town, gathered pine knots for the woods crews of lumber companies, made charcoal, and distilled whisky. For traditional and practical reasons, as well as because of a sometimes-grinding poverty, nineteenth-century crafts, skills, and techniques of making-do survived longest at the settlements. The last old man in an area who knew how to make white oak baskets, rive pieux-board fences, or plow with an ox usually resided in the freedmen’s settlement. Some community members, often younger people and increasing over time, periodically took jobs from whites as tenant farmers, woods-crew and sawmill workers, pulpwood haulers, stockmen, fence builders, and domestic help, but they maintained their community ties.

Community decline began sometime before midcentury, caused by multiple blows from circumstances far beyond local control. First came the ravages of the boll weevil, then the drastic fall of cotton prices during the Great Depression (aided and abetted by government programs that favored larger farmers over small ones), then World War II, which drew so many young people away from the countryside, never to return. Then, finally, came the bitter loss of community schools due to the divisive reform programs of consolidation and integration, leaving the churches and the graveyards as the only surviving community institutions—the first and now the last. By the year 2000, only at Juneteenth and community reunion day does the church parking lot fill with cars and the church pews with people, and the passerby sees how many souls still remain focused on this small rural place beside the county road.

Long-gone Anglo-American settlements have their reunions, too, but something seems different here. Our general notion of black people abandoning the hated countryside for increased freedom and improved opportunities in town is true enough, but it doesn’t fit the counter-current history of the freedmen’s settlements. These were marked places, rare communities where black people ran their own shows. “Freedom colonies,” some older residents had called them. When a settlement held its Juneteenth in
years past, African Americans from other rural communities and the town quarters often showed up. Schools at freedmen’s settlements tended to expand their grades upwards over time, with children from neighboring common school districts being bussed in to these “magnet schools” to continue their education. A remarkable number of settlement schools became eleven-grade rural high schools sponsored by Rosenwald Fund money, available during the early 1920s. Community support remained strong, and these schools often lasted into the 1960s, long after the Gilmer-Aikin Law made things very difficult for any rural school to survive.

The freedmen’s settlements once were valued places—sometimes almost legendary places—in the consciousness of black people, and they haven’t been forgotten. You can see this at reunion day, when the church parking lot fills up with cars with out-of-county and out-of-state license plates. And you can see this at County Line in Nacogdoches County, St. John’s Colony in Caldwell County, and other places where some people are returning after decades to life in the countryside.

Endnotes

1. Our full story of Texas freedmen’s settlements will be published by University of Texas Press in late 2004 and is tentatively entitled, “Freedom Colonies”: Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow.

2. Over two hundred black landowner communities are listed and discussed in The New Handbook of Texas, including Cologne, County Line (as “Upshaw, Texas”), Sweet Union, St. John’s Colony, Peyton Colony, Cuney, Barrett’s Settlement, and other communities mentioned in this essay.


4. See the “Exodus of 1879” listing in The New Handbook. Strange as it may seem (and it seems very strange), not a single scholarly article on freedmen’s settlements had appeared in the pages of the Southwestern Historical Quarterly or the Journal of Southern History by the end of 2003.


7. The story of ear nailing comes from a former bondsman whose narrative appears in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Texas Narratives*, p. 1581, as do other details in this paragraph.


11. Ibid.


14. Researched by Richard Orton. The Upshaw brothers and their County Line community receives recurrent discussion in our book to be published by the University of Texas Press (see note 1).

15. As historical marker files at the Texas Historical Commission in Austin attest, philanthropic former slave owners played important roles in the origins of the Cedar Branch, Hall’s Bluff, and Fodice communities of Houston County and were probably involved at other places in the county.

16. For an account of a racist attack on a freedmen’s settlement and the community’s self defense, see Monte Aker’s chilling *Flames After Midnight: Murder, Vengeance, and the Desolation of a Texas Community* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 122–33.
Richard Orton, Austin photographer, with the Upshaw family at the opening of Orton’s show, “The Upshaws of County Line”