

From Georgia to New Mexico: A Long Trek to Blackdom

By Sizwe Dumisani

Around the year 1900, a Black man named Francis (Frank) Boyer, born free in Hancock County, Georgia, set out with a purpose in-mind. His purpose was to establish an all-Black refuge and “a place for Black economic empowerment” for determined pioneers.¹

Frank Boyer was one of seventeen children. Boyer’s father Henry, formerly enslaved on the Boyer plantation in Georgia, was a veteran of the Mexican-American war; after returning



Frank Boyer, founder of Blackdom, New Mexico; ca 1903



Ella Boyer, one of the co-founders of Blackdom, New Mexico; ca 1903

from the war, the elder Boyer implanted vivid images in young Frank’s mind of a free and open western frontier. Frank’s frontier, pioneering spirit was also

influenced by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B DuBois. Like many African

Americans, Boyer—a former student of Atlanta Baptist College (now Morehouse

College), an ex-soldier and a Prince Hall Freemason—was seeking a safe place for his wife, Ella and their children. After Boyer witnessed the coldblooded murder of a Black barber, who accidentally nicked his client’s face while shaving him (Gaillard 13:42 – 14:06), Frank Boyer left the south, and headed out to establish a safe haven for his family and others who wanted to join him.

As Dr. Andrew Wall, Director of Black Studies at New Mexico State University, states: “A leader is someone who can motivate people to do things that they have not done before”

(Gaillard 2:33). Frank Boyer was a leader. He motivated Black people to leave a place of oppression and join him in building a new life, built on living a free, normal and sovereign life.

Gaillard's documentary also reminds the viewer of a segment of American history during the period just a few decades before Blackdom's founding year, providing a context for Boyer's drive to move west. Dr. Maisha Baton of the University of New Mexico states that in the period following the emancipation proclamation, Black people had to ask themselves some hard questions. Questions about survival in a land that either wanted to enslave them, exploit them or murder them. As Dr. Baton essentially states, these Africans, newly-freed from a life-sentence of enslavement at hard labor, had to ask themselves a basic question: "How shall we live out our lives" (6:00 -21)? Implicit in this question is an understanding of the American reality, an understanding of two hundred and fifty years of enslavement by a people who managed to convince themselves that it was God's will that African people should serve them, as their slaves—for life. For a large segment of the American nation, their entire economic system depended on the enslavement of the African as its economic foundation—its economic engine, the wealth-generator. These enslavers chose to kill their Northern brethren (and anyone else) to preserve their way of life and source of income—or die trying. After two and a half centuries of bondage, multiple wars, including a four-year civil war resulting in 600,000 dead bodies,² a piece of paper proclaiming freedom, and a 'reconstruction' betrayal/compromise—aborted with a wink, a nod and a handshake that let loose an onslaught of maniacal marauding murderers, and rapist on the newly-freed—many Black men, women and families chose to separate themselves from that centuries-long nightmare (9:37-9:51). The Supreme Court's 1896 Plessy v Ferguson decision of "separate but equal" was, essentially, an insignificant pronouncement from the perspective of Blackdomites: Blackdomites "...felt little need to be equal to a people of a morally bankrupt society" (Nelson 47).

Blackdom was, in fact, Frank Boyer's third attempt to find a place, set apart, where Black folk could live in peace and prosper (12:51-13:20). Frank Boyer found a place (originally Mescalero Apache land, then stolen Mescalero Apache land, and finally legally purchased stolen land) where he, his family and other pioneers could live—in relative peace. It took Boyer a year to reach New Mexico.³ Two years later, his wife Ella (formally trained as a midwife at the Haines Institute and vice president of the Blackdom Townsite Company) joined him.

Frank Boyer and twelve of his pioneering friends established the Blackdom Townsite Company on September 5, 1903 as the legal entity to build Blackdom (Nelson 21). Initially, the population of Blackdom began to steadily increase, year after year (1:36 -2:12).



Blackdom Township farmers, 1911. Courtesy New Mexico State University Library, Rio Grande Historical Collection, neg. no. RG98-103-001

In Blackdom, the residents established a modest farming-based community consisting of small family farms, a store that sold general goods, a house of worship (without exception, essential to every all-Black founded community in America) and a school (Gaillard 1:16 – 1:22). Some Blackdomites also earned an income in the service industry in other communities, such as Roswell, while maintaining their properties and farms in Blackdom.

For years the weather in Blackdom supported the farmers, allowing the farmers to provide food for their families. However, the water level in Blackdom eventually dropped too low to be viable; the town eventually had no water that wells could tap into, and the residents began to move away.

Oil was discovered in 1919 in Blackdom and the area around Blackdom, and Blackdom residents created the all-Black Blackdom Oil Company in 1921; Blackdom Oil provided revenue to those who invested (Nelson 21).

The depression starting in 1929 was an economic disaster that Blackdom, as a farming community, could not recover from. Blackdom leaders formally ended the town of Blackdom, New Mexico in 1930 (Nelson 21).

Frank Boyer and his family were one of the last families to leave Blackdom; the Boyers moved to Vado, New Mexico in 1921. Those who invested in the Blackdom Oil Company continued to receive royalty payments from oil extraction companies; some Blackdomites continued to receive these oil royalty payments through 1945 (Nelson 36).

For some scholars, such as Dr. Timothy Nelson, their view of Blackdom diverges from the traditional history. From Nelson's perspective, the Blackdom project did not fail; Blackdom transitioned from a "homesteader agricultural context" to an "extractive oriented concept", a financial asset that provided a source for extracting oil—serving as a generational wealth-generator (Nelson 36).

Blackdom now has no residents or buildings, but the legacy and vision of the brave men and women of Blackdom lives on in the hearts and minds of those who take the time learn the history of yet another Black-founded community, built by a determined people who simply wanted to live in peace in a sovereign space.⁴

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Notes

¹ (Nelson 17; Gaillard 00:14:35–00:15:03)

² See Michael Adams' *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War*, pg. 111

³ Some secondary sources, including Gaillard's documentary, claim that Mr. Boyer walked the 2,000+ miles from Georgia to New Mexico, possibly accompanied by his future brother in-law Daniel Keyes. Others, such as Dr. Timothy Nelson, question the veracity of this claim (NMPB Colores 2:25 – 3:11). Also, see Chapter 2 *Precondition* of Nelson's *Book Blackdom, New Mexico: The Significance of the Afro-Frontier 1900-1930*. I have not been able to find any primary sources (such as a journal written by Frank Boyer) that can verify this claim that he walked 2,000+ miles from Georgia to New Mexico.

⁴ Cindy Gaillard's documentary on the town of Blackdom, New Mexico provides another example of a town planned and founded by self-reliant, determined Black pioneers. Any researcher of Black-founded towns in America should include this short documentary as a valuable resource. The narration by Charlie Smith and commentaries by Dr. Maisha Baton, Dr. Andrew Wall and Dr. Cortez Williams are informative and professional. Dr. Timothy Nelson's *Book, Blackdom, New Mexico. The Significance of the Afro-Frontier. 1900-1930*, also adds to the literature, especially his information on the Blackdom Oil Company, and provides a different perspective from which to view Blackdom and what motivated Blackdomites' participation in building a new life in Blackdom. Dr. Nelson also provides a Blackdom view of pending New Mexico statehood, a reminder of Dr. Margaret Washington's assessment of what statehood brings to the frontier—comparing some of the ideas of the Turner Thesis to an African American perspective of the frontier (Washington 238).

Works Cited

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