

The Town of Boley—Indian Territory

By Sizwe Dumisani

The Black pioneers in Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory established the greatest number of all-Black towns.¹ In what is now the state of Oklahoma, there are currently thirteen historically all-Black towns that still exist—people still live there (Aveilhe). The town of Boley, founded in Indian Territory in 1903², was a town that was planned and founded primarily by both

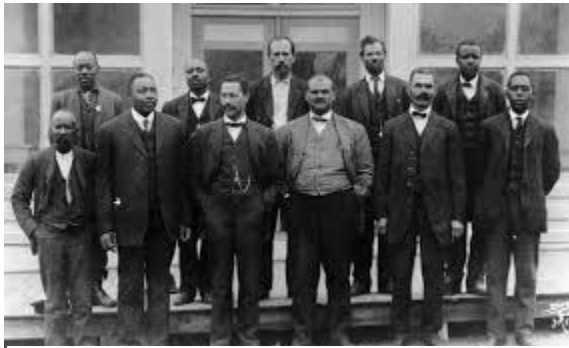


Figure 1 Boley Town Council. Photo Credit: Oklahoma Historical Society

African Americans; some funding and a railway depot were provided by White speculators and those sympathetic to the vision of these self-determined African Americans (Stuckey, Boley, Oklahoma (1903-)); J.B. Boley, a white man and the town's namesake, and manager of the Fort Smith and Western Railroad, was influential in

providing a railway stop at the new town that would bear his name. The Black founding pioneers of Boley included: “Thomas Haynes, a Black Texan; Oniel H. Bradley, a child of the 1879 Exodusters migration to Kansas; and James Barnett, a Creek Freed-man (formerly enslaved in the Creek nation)” (Stuckey 493). African Americans were invited to Boley, by the founders, to purchase land, build a homestead for their families, and contribute to building and supporting businesses, schools, churches, farms and other institutions.

Like all pioneers, the Boley pioneers left behind their old lives to go to a place where they hoped to experience a new way of living; as Dr Stuckey notes, in essence: these all-Black enclaves represent the efforts of Black folks to live as human beings outside of the eyes of their historical oppressors (Stuckey 493). The people of Boley were farming on their own land (or rented land), and by 1911 Boley had over 4,000 residents and established several businesses and institutions: three cotton gin businesses; two colleges³ (Creek-Seminole College and Methodist

Episcopal College College); an electric plant, water system and ice plant; a masonic temple, and



Figure 2 Creek Seminole College, Boley.
Photo Credit: The Center for Public Integrity

two banks—the Farmers and Merchants Bank and the Boley Bank and Trust Company.⁴

A common thread running through the hearts and minds of the residents of virtually every all-Black town was their belief in self-reliance—the ‘self’

being the collective self. These pioneers believed in their ability to collectively organize, establish farms

to feed their families, and build businesses and churches that serve the residents; they built elementary schools to educate the children and some even established colleges to educate young adults. They were aware of the fact that Black people were surrounded by hostility; this was true of the Boley pioneers even on the Oklahoma frontier. They were aware of the need to protect

their interest and had the foresight to be proactive. The bankers in Boley were keenly aware of the need to keep land under the control of Black people: They made an extra effort to make loans to Black farmers and buy-up available real estate to resale to Black buyers (Stuckey, “Boley, Indian Territory”, 503). The people of Boley, naturally, founded and built churches, an elementary school and a high school. Boley had several newspapers; the Boley Progress newspaper was instrumental in recruiting new residents to Boley.

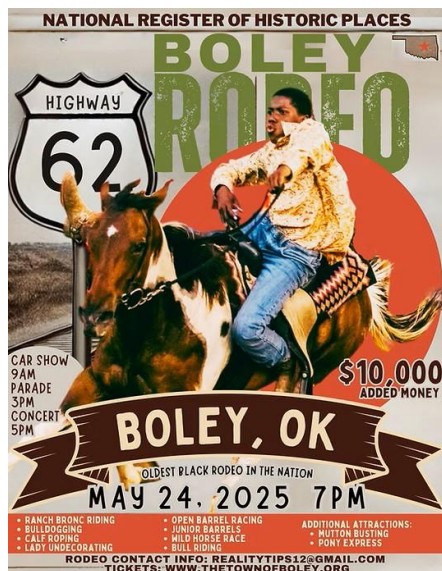


Figure 3 The Boley Progress Newspaper
Photo Credit: Center for Public Integrity

Boley did face some challenges: one of these challenges included Oklahoma becoming a state; with statehood came the formalization (and normalization) of racism⁵, as in New Mexico, Kansas and other territories after acquiring statehood. Despite the formalization and the subsequent normalization of racism in the state of Oklahoma—that is, despite the full force of the entire legal system of the new state of Oklahoma assaulting Black folks by humiliation, ostracism and suppressing their progress—Blacks continued leaving the south and migrated to Boley (Stuckey, “Boley, Indian Territory”, 508).

Boley’s population began to decline as a result of the stock market crash and the resulting economic depression. In addition, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s was a major source of the decline (Stuckey 508).

Boley today is undergoing a revitalization. The Project 2020 Foundation and the Boley Legacy Consortium are credited with directing and managing the revitalization efforts ("Boley,



Oklahoma: A Legacy of Black Excellence and Resilience"). And Boley, of course, continues to be famous nationally for its annual rodeo.⁶

Boley is on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Figure 4 Boley Rodeo.
Photo Credit:
TheTownOfBoley.com

Notes

¹ For a reference to Oklahoma establishing the greatest number of all-Black towns, see the article by Tara Aveilhe in the Works Cited section below. In researching these freedom towns in Oklahoma, I found a treasure: Amateur filmmaker and minister, Reverend Solomon Sir Jones made over six hours of film, documenting the lives of ordinary residents of all-Black Oklahoma towns between 1924 and 1928. Press your ctrl key while clicking on one of the three links below to view a few of these short films:

Combs Rhea. “Rare 1920s Footage: All-Black Towns Living the American Dream”. uploaded by *National Geographic*, 2 Oct 2016, youtu.be/1_dKmtCWWao.

“Oklahoma Bound”. *Oklahoma Historical Society*. youtu.be/ePTWSslli6M

“Solomon Sir Jones Capturing Black Oklahomans on Film”. *Oklahoma City Thunder*.

youtu.be/jBomoHtUFkQOkIHOM

² Many scholars, including Dr. Stuckey, place Boley’s founding in 1903. See the Master’s thesis of Velma Dolphin-Ashley in the Works Cited section for the year (1905) Boley’s incorporation papers were filed.

³ See Stucky’s dissertation in the Works cites, page 41.

⁴ thetownofboley.org/about

See also appendix B of Dolphin-Ashley on page 79, for a list of Boley businesses in 1940.

⁵ In Dr. Margaret Washington’s article “African American History and the Frontier Thesis” (see Works Cited, below), she describes the Turner Frontier Thesis. Turner’s thesis lauds American “democracy, institutions, and civilization” as an outgrowth of the frontier movement. Dr. Washington contrasts Turner’s frontier thesis with what could be called the African American frontier thesis; evidently, Peter H. Woods and others have also written about this African American perspective on frontier pioneering (Washington 238). Dr. Washington notes that the frontier for Black folk was tightly-coupled with the ideas of safety for your

family, protection from racial assault, and an opportunity to live as human beings. These ideas gave the word frontier, for Black folk, a wider meaning than Turner's (Washington 238). Dr. Washington goes further and provides an additional reason for this African American frontier perspective; the frontier lacks the trappings of what statehood often brings: a non-democratic polity, run by un-civil, racist institutions. See also Luckerson in Works Cited.

⁶ Some short videos of Boley's annual rodeo can be found here: thetownofboley.org/rodeo

Works Cited

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