

Hardships Endured: The Morton City Settlement 1879-1880

By: Ted Brown

When speaking of black settlements in Western Kansas the story does not begin and end with Nicodemus. Morton City, a black settlement southwest of Nicodemus was at one time a promising black community. More than 100 exodusters (107, according to the census data) got off the train in Kinsley Kansas, in the year 1879, searching for a land full of promise, free of racism and poverty.¹ Kinsley, in Edwards County, was the nearest train depot to the site chose for settlement, but it still laid thirty miles from the proposed location.² The actual location was in Hodgeman County, a flat, largely treeless plain, covered with buffalo grass. John F. Thomas, minister of the colored First Baptist Church of Lexington Kentucky became the rallying force for the settlement project. The Morton City Town Company was then established, and its shares were sold, mainly to prospective settlers who lived around Lexington and Harrodsburg, Kentucky.³ There are no records concerning the platting of the Morton city Settlement besides that of the Morton City Town charter, which reads:

The undersigned, Anderson Morgan, Thomas P. Moore, Archie Caldwell, Carey Smothers, and John F. Thomas, all of the county of Hodgeman and state of Kansas, do hereby associate themselves together for the purpose of forming a private corporation, for profit, under the state of Kansas. 1. The name of the corporation is Morton City Town company. 2. The purpose for which it is founded is the laying out of a townsite and the sale and conveyance of the same into lots and blocks, subdivisions or otherwise. 3. The place of business of said corporation are Morton City Town company in Hodgeman county and the city of Topeka, Shawnee county, both in the state of Kansas. 4. The term for which the corporation is founded is 50 years. 5. The number of directors of this corporation is five, and the names and residences of these persons appointed directors for the first year are as follows (signatures) Thomas P. Moore, Anderson Morgan, Archie Caldwell, Carey Smothers, and John F. Thomas, all of Morton City, Hodgeman county, state of Kansas. 6. The amount of stock of this corporation is the sum of 20,000 dollars. And the number of shares into which capital stock is divided is 200, and the value of each share is 100 dollars. 7. This corporation is founded to lay out a townsite on section 27, township 22, south of range 25 west in Hodgeman county, Kansas. In witness thereof on

¹ *The Hutchinson News* (daily). March 7, 1999; Mr. Wilburn Bradshaw, "Keeping the History".

² C. Robert Haywood, "The Hodgeman County Colony," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*. Vol. 12, 1989. pg. 210.

³ Heinie Schmidt, "Site of Hodgeman County Ghost Town Recalls Unfilled Dream of Pioneers." *High Plains Journal*, January 10, pg. 6.

this 23rd day of Nov. 1877, I have herewith set my hand and affixed my seal in Shawnee county, St. of Kansas. George T. Gillmore, Not. Public.⁴

Leadership of the actual migration to Hodgeman County was passed to a thirty year old black man by the name of Thomas P. Moore, one of the signers of the town incorporation.⁵ As a member of the post-Civil War Kentucky legislature, he and his brother Benjamin had resisted the Democrats' attempt to keep blacks from voting in the 1870 Kentucky general election.⁶ The importance of this topic lies within the scarcity of black people remaining in this area today, as well as the scarcity of material on this particular subject. Personally, this story has added meaning due to the fact that I am related to the Bradshaw clan of exodusters that came from Harrodsburg, Kentucky and settled in Hodgeman County.

Today all that is left of the Morton City dream is Wilburn Bradshaw and a few of his family members. The exodusters that moved there with his great-grandparents, Louis and Elisabeth Bradshaw, one by one, died or moved away. Wilburn recalls, "A majority of land out here at one time was owned by blacks, but they couldn't make a living farming. They sold their land and moved to towns." Bradshaw, now 84, still lives just miles from where the settlement was first erected. His family brought with them to Kansas the trade of stone masonry, which helped his ancestors survive in the harsh plains of the west. He and his brothers actually built the museum in Jetmore where much of the research for this paper took place. Wilburn, more than anything is proud of the land that has been in his family for more than 100 years, "I tell my children never to get rid of the land. Once it is gone you can never have it back." He had farmed the land until recently, but kept it in the family by passing the responsibility to his son and

⁴ Schmidt, "Site of Hodgeman County Ghost Town Recalls Unfilled Dream of Pioneers." pg. 6.

⁵ *Dodge City Times*, September 13, 1879.

⁶ C. Robert Haywood, "The Hodgeman County Colony." *Kansas History: A journal of the Central Plains*. Vol. 12, 1989. pg. 210.

nephew. Two of his children still live in and around Jetmore, and each have a family of their own ensuring the Bradshaw clan's future in Hodgeman County.

Race relations between the Morton City settlers and the white people of the surrounding area were much better than those faced back in Kentucky, but by no means were they looked upon as equals. At first the settlers from Kentucky were watched closely from afar by the people from the surrounding towns. Harry Gryden, a lawyer from Dodge City interviewed the new arrivals before they left Kinsley.⁷ The thing that alarmed many citizens were the massive number of freedmen that were coming into the state from the South. "Kansas is to receive one-third of the migrants and between five and ten thousand that are leaving Georgia alone."⁸ The editor of the paper manufactured fear of over-crowding, "What I fear most is an army of colored tramps, requiring substantial community support because of their destitute condition."⁹ Numerous violent acts were committed against these exodusters after their arrival. One account is that of three white men in Kinsley who were fined for throwing rocks and breaking windows in black homes. The Kinsley city marshal roped a black man who he thought was riding his horse too fast through town.¹⁰ The Dodge City Daily Times noted that Hodgeman and Edwards counties were "pleased with their dark allies, and will dwell together as brethren, in unity." The paper's editor soon there after added, "Ford County offers no inducements and has no attraction for the colored man, but Dodge City could profitably engage a few dusky maidens-to do washing and such."¹¹ these documents seem to shed more light on the good that the surrounding townspeople, while briefly mentioning, or not mentioning at all the atrocities that occurred during these times. When

⁷ H.C. Norman, "History of Hodgeman County, Kansas," (unpublished, 1941). 3, Library, KSHS.

⁸ *Dodge City Times*, September 13, 1879.

⁹ *Ibid.*, April 26, 1879.

¹⁰ Haywood, "The Hodgeman County Colony," pg. 215.

¹¹ *Dodge City Times*, September 13, 1879.

asked, Wilburn Bradshaw summed up the race relations of the area in few words, "Racism still lingers." Wilburn would know, the house he lived in was burnt to the ground in 1963 while his family was away, and then three years after they rebuilt it, the house was again, burned down.

The Morton City settlers had done little planning before embarking on their journey beyond gathering enough money together to actually make it to Hodgeman county. The settlers arrived with little to no money, making their transition extremely difficult.¹² Lafayette Green, a Morton city settler, arrived in Kinsley with fourteen dollars--after the eleven dollar train ride from Lexington.¹³ This fourteen dollars was just enough to pay his land office fees. Lafayette and his family of six went right to work, as he and two of his older children hired out as laborers, with wages paying between fifty and seventy-five cents a day. On top of that, his family managed to plow eight acres of land in the first year, and built a 14 by 14 foot underground house. Unfortunately none of the plantings survived the first year.¹⁴ Drought hit the Morton City Settlement hard in the year 1879. One settler recalled, "I can not now remember of a shower during the year 1879 or up to July 1880 that was sufficient enough to lay the dust."¹⁵ The *Buckner Independent* reported that both the spring and winter crops of grain and vegetables were an "entire failure in 1879 and in 1880."¹⁶ C.E. Roughton, a prominent white business owner in Kinsley did not ignore the plight of the settlers. He advised them to abandon the settlement and find jobs in nearby towns. After realizing the resolve of these black men, women, and children he took it upon himself to secure a small amount of aid from the Freedman's Aid Bureau in

¹² Haywood, "The Hodgeman County Colony," pg. 212.

¹³ Ibid., 212.

¹⁴ Schmidt, "Site of Hodgeman County Ghost Town Recalls Unfilled Dream of Pioneers," 1.

¹⁵ Haywood, "The Hodgeman County Colony," pg. 215.

¹⁶ Ibid. pg. 216.

Topeka.¹⁷ Mattie Moore, who was Thomas P. Moore's wife, could not nurse her baby due to lack of nourishment. In search of an alternative the family also found themselves unable to purchase a cow for milk. Sadly, the mother's inability to produce milk led to the babies passing.¹⁸ The Moore's then moved to Dodge City to find work, but in the spring of 1879 Thomas returned and built the first stone house in the settlement.¹⁹ The picture below shows the remains of Thomas Moore's house as it stands today along the outskirts of Jetmore.

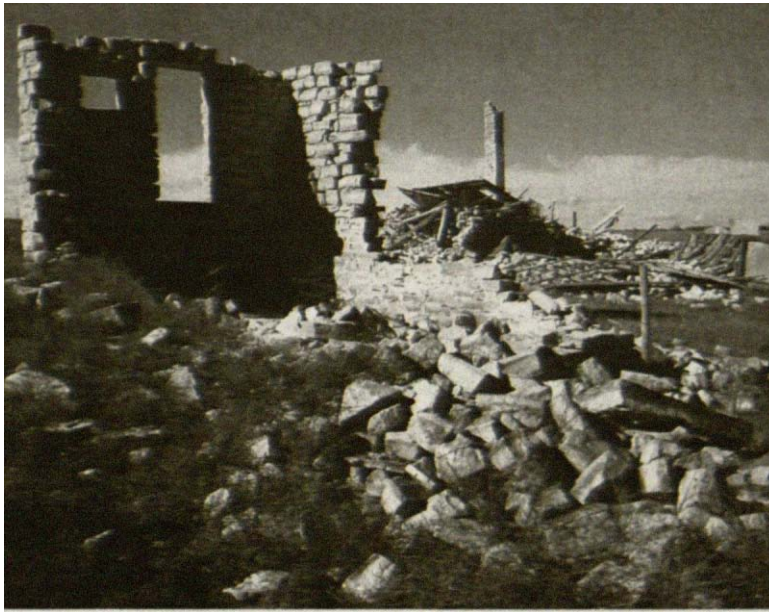


Figure 1. Thomas Moore's stone house, taken at the original site of the Morton City settlement.
SOURCE: Private Collection.

Moore and a fellow settler named Steele built this stone building in 1879. At the peak of the settlement there was a church, three stone houses, nine sod houses, and the remaining dwellings were dugouts.²⁰

¹⁷ Norman, "History of Hodgeman County," pg. 3.

¹⁸ Norman, "History of Hodgeman County," pg. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 3.

²⁰ Schmidt, "Site of a Hodgeman County Ghost Town Recalls Unfilled Dream of Pioneers," pg. 1.

Economic opportunities for these new exodusters were few and far between. When the settlers arrived in Hodgeman County they did not have any equipment to farm with and had to work as hired laborers in nearby towns to gain capital. Women usually went to work as domestic servants, while men worked on local farms--in some instances they would travel fifty miles or more for work. Wages ranged anywhere from 75 cents to 1.50 per day, the latter price was only paid during the harvest season.²¹ Some settlers after moving into nearby towns established flourishing businesses; the barbers in Jetmore, Larned, and Kinsley were all black, there was also a black owned livery barn, as well holsters, teamsters, carpenters, cooks, and blacksmiths who came from the colony.²²

The most important building in the settlement was the Baptist church, which was considered to be the place of spiritual cleansing and the center of the town social life. John F. Thomas who played a major role in starting the settlement was the minister of the church. The church leaders secured public aid from surrounding towns to improve the conditions of the settlers. As a testament to just how important the church was it outlasted the town by forty years.²³

The Morton City settlement is thought to be, by most people a tragic failure of a black colony in Western Kansas. To call this settlement a failure though would be a gross miscalculation. These brave people might not have sustained their settlement but they dispersed into surrounding towns and took advantage of opportunities that allowed them to survive, and thrive in Kansas. The exodusters in search of their promise land, may have faced many challenges, but through their strength and determination forever revolutionized Western Kansas.

"The generation of today doesn't realize what hardships have been endured, and what trials

²¹ Ibid., pg. 3.

²² Haywood, "The Hodgeman County Colony," pg. 217.

²³ Ibid., pg. 218.

*have been passed through to make this country, in general, and Western Kansas in particular, what it is today." -- Mrs. Mattie Moore*²⁴

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 211.

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