To Better Oneself: Sully County's African-American "Colony"

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The history of South Dakota is a diverse one, with many different cultures and peoples. One group often overlooked are African Americans, even though they have constituted a presence in the state since territorial days. While nearly every sizeable South Dakota community has had black residents, few people realize that one county in central South Dakota hosted a settlement made up exclusively of African Americans. Known variously as the "Sully County Colored Colony" or the "Blair Colony," after the first black family to settle there, this "colony" was actually a loosely organized group of African Americans who chose to live and work near one another and whose members came and went over a period of fifty years.

The African-American community that developed in Fairbank, Pearl, and Grandview townships of Sully County was in part a result of the Homestead Act of 1862, which enabled blacks and others with limited resources to acquire land without first accumulating a great amount of money. In exchange for living on and improving a 160-acre parcel, as well as paying a small filing fee, a homesteader could gain title to a claim after five years. Another development that prompted the growth of the black community in central South Dakota was the collapse of Reconstruction in the American South following the Civil War. When Democrats returned to power in the South in 1877, tens of thousands of former slaves, or "Exodusters," left to seek equality and opportunity in the Republican-dominated states of the North and West. In Kansas, one group established Nicodemus, an all-black town of nearly three hundred residents that flourished for several years be-

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The town of Fairbank, which attracted speculators and settlers in the 1880s, can be seen at the bend in the Missouri River in the center of this photograph.

fore dissolving due to a series of agricultural disasters and poor investments.¹

The prospect of making a fresh start in a new land drew African Americans to Dakota Territory, as well. Among those who came in search of greater economic and social freedom were two brothers, Benjamin P. Blair and Patrick Henry Blair, who traveled to Sully County from Illinois in 1882 to establish a ranch near the Missouri River and the new town of Fairbank. The enterprise prospered, forming the nucleus of Sully County's African-American "colony." By some accounts, its numbers reached two hundred before the last black residents left in the 1950s.²

The Blair brothers had arrived in Sully County just as the Chicago & North Western (CNW) Railroad was promoting a location north of Little Bend on the Missouri River as a suitable site for a bridge that would enable the railroad to extend its line west. Based on speculation

^{1.} Quintard Taylor, In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), pp. 136-41.

^{2.} Sully County Old Settlers' Association, History of Sully County (Onida, S.Dak.: Onida Watchman, 1939), p. 82.

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that the railroad would cross at that point, the Missouri Valley Townsite Company filed on the site in October 1883, divided it into lots, and named the fledgling town after N. K. Fairbank, a CNW investor who had made his fortune in the soap business. Shortly thereafter, a rival speculator filed on land across a gulch to the north. Both the upper and lower portions of Fairbank prospered for a time, serving as a steamboat and stagecoach stop and supporting a hotel, two schoolhouses, a lumberyard, hardware store, bank, livery stable, ice-skating rink, and three newspapers. A college and large depot were also planned, but when CNW officials decided to route the railroad south through Pierre, the town quickly folded. By 1889, just four buildings remained. In the meantime, however, homesteaders had arrived to take up land in the surrounding area.3

Benjamin and Patrick Blair selected a homestead in Fairbank Township on the northwest quarter of Section 1, Township 115 North, Range 80 West. Their parents, Norval and Mary Bagby Blair, who moved the rest of the family to Sully County in the spring of the following year, also filed a homestead claim in Section 1 of Fairbank Township. Norval Blair had been born a slave in Steward County, Tennessee, in 1814. Shortly after being freed at the age of forty-nine, he moved his family to Morris, Illinois, where he taught school and farmed. He and his wife, who was said to be one-half Cherokee Indian, had seven children: Nancy Jane, Benjamin, Patrick, John Wesley, Winnie, Mary E. ("Betty"), and Lucy Anne. Only Nancy Jane, the eldest daughter, is known to have married. John Wesley, who worked as a Pullman porter, was the only one of the children who did not settle in Sully County. Well-traveled and well-read, he kept the family supplied with magazines and books, giving them a knowledge of world affairs that was unusual for the time.4

^{3.} Ibid., pp. 81-82; Sully County Centennial History Book Committee, 100 Years of Proud People, 1883-1983: A History of Sully County (Onida, S.Dak.: Sully County Centennial Committee, 1983), pp. 282-83.

^{4.} Sully County Old Settlers' Association, History of Sully County, pp. 76-77, 83. Betti VanEpps-Taylor speculates that John Wesley Blair's career, which enabled him to see large sections of the country, may have played a role in the family's original decision to move to Dakota Territory. She notes that the pioneering black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux credited



Benjamin Blair homesteaded in Sully County in 1882 and encouraged other African Americans to settle in the area.

The Blairs became extensive landowners in Sully County, building fine houses and surviving the failure of the town of Fairbank, where Ben Blair had invested in several lots. In addition to raising crops and livestock, the Blair family owned a number of outstanding Morgan horses, which they circulated on the racing circuit around the state. Among the most noteworthy was the quick-starting Johnny Bee, the fastest horse in South Dakota from 1907 to 1909.

Two of the Blair daughters, Betty and Winnie, left home in 1901 to operate a restaurant and bakery in Pierre. In 1903, they sold the busi-

his own work as a porter with giving him the information he used in choosing to homestead in Gregory County in 1905. Taylor, in "The Black Settlers of Sully County" in *Papers of the Twenty-eighth Annual Dakota History Conference*, comp. Arthur R. Huseboe and Harry F. Thompson (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1996), p. 782.

^{5.} Sully County Centennial History Book Committee, 100 Years of Proud People, p. 283; Martha Linde, Western Dakota Horse Stories (N.p.: By the Author, 1989), p. 127.

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After operating businesses in Pierre, Betty Blair sold real estate in the vicinity of her family's ranch.

ness and moved to Des Moines, Iowa, where Betty worked for the King Real Estate Company and specialized in the sale of South Dakota land near her family's ranch. Her first buyer, William Davis, purchased a quarter section and realized five thousand dollars when he sold out in 1918. She made her biggest sale in 1906 to John McGruder, who bought twelve hundred acres for thirty-seven thousand dollars.⁶

At the same time, her brother Benjamin had joined with other African Americans in the Midwest in forming the Northwestern Homestead Movement. Organized in Yankton in 1906, the group sought to attract industrious blacks from the South to settle in "colonies" throughout South Dakota, including sites in Aurora, Meade, Stanley, and Lyman counties.⁷ Heading the organization was

^{6.} Sully County Old Settlers' Association, History of Sully County, p. 83.

^{7.} Yankton Press and Dakotan, 17 July 1906.

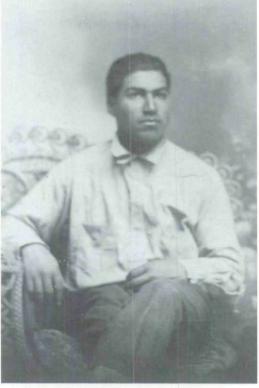
Reverend John C. Coleman, a pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, who hoped to remove blacks from the "congested districts" of the East and South and prepare them for an "independent existence" as farmers. In fact, the Blair family had agreed to donate seventeen hundred acres of their land for an agricultural college to educate African Americans in the farming methods best suited to the Northern Great Plains. A number of interested persons from Iowa and Missouri visited western Sully County, where Ben Blair hoped to convince families with enough capital to "purchase and equip farms, and start on a prosperous basis" to settle. While the plans of the Northwestern Homestead Movement never came to pass on the grand scale its organizers envisioned, the Blair family land formed the core of what became the largest African-American settlement in the state.

Most of the Blair family members had taken advantage of the Homestead or Timber Culture acts to add to their land holdings. A number of the settlers who arrived as a result of the colonizing efforts, however, were able to purchase their land outright. John McGruder, for example, had owned and farmed the land of his former master in Bethel, Missouri, where he also trained and raised fine race horses. ¹⁰ Upon visiting Sully County in 1906, he purchased the Tom Lytle ranch, moving there with his family two years later. McGruder and his wife, Ellen Kenchylo McGruder, had nine children: William, Emma, James, Sarah, Eliza, Mary, George, Etta, and Ida. They ran an extensive agricultural operation, with approximately three hundred head of cattle, three thousand sheep, and thirty race and work horses. John McGruder purchased a large steam tractor and played a hand in breaking much of the farm ground in Fairbank and Grandview townships. Upon his death on 11 September 1913, his son William took

^{8.} Murdo Pioneer, 8 Nov. 1906.

^{9.} Pierre Capital Journal, 13 Apr. 1906.

^{10.} Sully County Old Settlers' Association, *History of Sully County*, p. 84. When one of McGruder's horses won a race at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he received a wrought-iron stove with the date inlaid in granite. It subsequently became a family heirloom. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 1 Feb. 1999.



John McGruder bought land in Sully County in 1906 and is the only black settler whose descendants remain in the area.

over the farm, which passed to William's son Louis in 1939. A nephew, Cecil Leo McGruder, purchased the land from Louis's estate in 1974. He continues to own the property but lives in Pierre and rents the land to other farmers, including his son Roger McGruder. II

Another immigrant to Fairbank Township from Bethel, Missouri, was William Day, who arrived in 1909 and homesteaded the southeast quarter of Section 10 with his wife, Annie Mitchell Day, and their four children. Annie Day died in 1911, leaving her husband to raise

^{11.} Sully County Old Settlers' Association, History of Sully County, pp. 84-85; Sioux Falls Argus Leader, 1 Feb. 1999.

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and educate the children on his own. Almer Figgins, also of Bethel, homesteaded the southwest quarter of Section 15 in 1910. He then purchased the quarter to the south and built up a comfortable farmstead, where he lived until his death in 1933. In addition to farming, he served as clerk of Fairbank School District No. 7 for thirteen years.¹²

Among the other early "colony" members were John William Joyner, his sister Sadie, two other siblings, and their parents, who came to Fairbank Township in 1908 from Des Moines, Iowa. Sadie raised two orphaned nieces and taught at Fairbank School for many years before returning to Iowa in 1935. John farmed, passing his property down to his son William, who resided there through the 1930s. ¹³

Black families continued to migrate to Sully County for at least two decades after the Blairs began promoting the area, attracted by the opportunity to live and farm in association with other African Americans. Charles Speese moved his wife and family to South Dakota from

12. Sully County Old Settlers' Association, History of Sully County, p. 85, 13, Ibid.



These unidentified women belonged to Sully County's African-American "colony."

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the Nebraska Sandhills in 1925. Living first on property the Blairs owned and then moving to at least two other locations nearby, they apparently rented land or worked for others until leaving Sully County in the late 1940s. Other families who became part of this community in later years included Merity Gorham, William Nash, Robert Fields, J. E. Burke, Green Windsor, and Doc Palmer. Fern Spencer Barber recalled that her father, W. H. Spencer, employed a number of Sully County's African Americans to help work his four-thousand-acre ranch, which included the site of the town of Fairbank. Cecil Leo McGruder recalled spending time as a child at the Spencer place, where the town's hotel and livery stable still stood. ¹⁴

By the mid-1950s, the African-American community in Sully County had dwindled, victims of economic hard times and the fact that young people had to leave in order to find other blacks to marry, until only the descendants of John McGruder's son William remained.15 Today, Sully County holds few visible reminders of its rich African-American history. Among them is the Fairbank schoolhouse, which once occupied the southeast corner of Section twenty-one in Fairbank Township. Many of the children who belonged to this community attended school in the twenty-by-forty-foot rough-hewn log structure, including the McGruders and most of the seventeen Speese children. The Fairbank schoolhouse also provided a gathering place for Sunday church services, which were conducted in the 1930s by a Lutheran minister who traveled from Pierre. Fairbank School operated into the 1960s, when consolidation efforts closed down the smallest schools throughout western Sully County. Rather than allowing the structure to be destroyed, Cecil Leo McGruder moved it some years ago to his place, where it still sits today. 16

^{14.} Ibid., p. 86; Sully County Centennial History Book Committee, 100 Years of Proud People, pp. 288-90; interview with Cecil Leo McGruder, Feb. 2000.

^{15.} Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, 10 Mar. 1957. Many black settlers left during the drought years of the 1930s, bringing the population of the group to approximately forty-eight in 1938. Sully County Old Settlers' Association, *History of Sully County*, p. 82.

^{16.} Sully County Centennial History Book Committee, 100 Years of Proud People, p. 289; interview with McGruder.

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Students at the Fairbank school posed for this photograph in 1933.

The most notable remnant of Sully County's African-American community is the Blair Cemetery, located at Township 115 North, Range 80 West, Section 2. Norval Blair chose the quiet hilltop near his homestead as a place to rest members of his family and other African-American settlers. Blair himself is buried here, having died in 1916 at the age of 102, as are his wife Mary (1907) and sons Patrick (1925) and Benjamin (1926). The cemetery also contains the graves of Mrs. William Day and three unnamed Day infants. Others buried there include John McGruder, Florence Allen, Etta Howard, Nancy Wright, and two infants identified as the Harroway twins. Today, the Ken Darland family owns the land where the cemetery is located, but McGruder family members maintain the grounds in remembrance of the African Americans who chose to make Sully County their home. ¹⁷

^{17.} Blair Cemetery Records, Onida, Sully County, S.Dak., Graves Restoration Project, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre.

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