Support Material: Black Canadian Heritage:

Secondary Material: Settlement and Immigration

URL of the following: http://www.abheritage.ca/pasttopresent/opportunity/petition.html

*The Petition*

We, the undersigned residents of the city of Edmonton, respectfully urge upon your attention and upon that of the Government of which you are the head, the serious menace to the future welfare of a large portion of Western Canada, by reason of the alarming influx of negro settlers. This influx commenced about four years ago in a very small way, only four or five families coming in the first season, followed by thirty or forty families the next year. Last year several hundred negroes arrived in Edmonton and settled in surrounding territory. Already this season nearly three hundred have arrived; and the statement is made, both to these arrivals and by press dispatches, that these are but the advent of such negroes as are now here was most unfortunate for the country, and that further arrivals in large numbers would be disastrous. We cannot admit as any factors the argument that these people may be good farmers or good citizens. It is a matter of common knowledge that it has been proved in the United States that negroes and whites cannot live in proximity without the occurrence of revolting lawlessness and the development of bitter race hatred, and that the most serious question facing the United States today is the negro problem. We are anxious that such a problem should not be introduced into this lawlessness as have developed in all sections in the United States where there is any considerable negro element. There is not reason to believe that we have here a higher order of civilization, or that the introduction of a negro problem here would have different results. We therefore respectfully urge that such steps immediately be taken by the Government of Canada as will prevent any further immigration of negroes into western Canada. And your petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

*Edmonton Capital, April 25, 1911*

courtesy of the City of Edmonton Archives

**PARTY OF 42 NEGROES COMING FROM OKLAHOMA**

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Another Detachment to Join Colony Now Located [sic.] North of Edmonton—Immigration Regulations Are Complied With.

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North Portal, Sask., March 25—A car containing 42 negroes, men, women and children, arrived here on Sunday from Oklahoma, en route to the Edmonton district, where they propose engaging in farming. They are being held here by the immigration authorities and yesterday underwent medical examination as to physical condition. Two-thirds of the number will be able to comply
with the immigration regulations. One family will be turned back on financial grounds, though the majority are fairly well fixed.

Two cars of stock and effects are to follow. Among the party are ten children. These people have been engaged in cotton growing in Oklahoma, and will take homesteads in Western Canada near to a party of negroes who entered Canada via Emerson last spring.

From Edmonton Bulletin, March 25, 1913
Courtesy of the City of Edmonton Archives

Keeping the Keystone Legacy

by Debbie Culbertson

"Come on in," says Gwen Hooks, ushering me into the bright entranceway of her Leduc home. On this frosty winter evening, a gas fire warms Hook's cozy living room. Photographs of children and grandchildren fill coffee tables and shelves. Mementos of past achievements also hold special pride of place—one bookshelf holds numerous awards Hook has won for her poetry.

However, the most prized keepsake of all may be a large aerial photograph, hanging on the wall near the fireplace. It shows a tidy square farmhouse set amidst rolling fields edged with poplar and spruce. Until a few years ago, the farm belonged to Hooks and her late husband Mark—descendants of some of the first Black settlers in Keystone (now Breton). Hooks has recently written a book entitled The Keystone Legacy: Recollections of a Black Settler, describing the lives of those brave homesteaders.

As she boils the kettle for tea, Hooks describes the early Black settlers who came to Alberta in the first decades of this century. Most came from Oklahoma where they experienced segregation and racial violence.

In the years before it became a state, Oklahoma had been officially designated as "Indian Territory" by the American government. Many of the blacks who lived in the territory were slaves of the aboriginal people. After the Civil War, these slaves were freed, and the government ordered that they be given parcels of land. The aboriginal people accepted the decision, and the two groups coexisted.

For a while it looked as though Oklahoma had become a safe haven for blacks. However, in 1898, the government—under growing pressure from white settlers interested in the fertile soil and climate of Oklahoma—forced the aboriginal people to cede most of their rights to the state's rich farmland. Whites flooded into Oklahoma and by the time statehood was established, segregationist policies were again in place. These policies, supported by white supremacist organizations, forced many black farmers to sell their land and look elsewhere for peace and security.

At the same time, the Canadian government was making changes to its immigration policies. Clifford Sifton, Canada's minister of the interior, persuaded the Laurier government to promote the settlement of the prairies. Under Sifton’s direction, the Immigration Department began advertising in the U.S. and Europe in an effort to draw immigrants to the West. An immigrant farmer would be given title to a quarter section of land (160 acres) for just $10, if he stayed on the land for three years and improved it by clearing, planting and building a house.
As Hooks points out in her book, this new offer was a powerful incentive for Oklahoma blacks. Thousand sold their farms and began the long journey to Canada. "They came over in family groups in order to survive," says Hooks. If one group went to one place, the whole family went there." Both Hooks’s family and that of her future husband Mark made the long trek to Canada.

The new settlers faced many challenges. The most daunting was clearing the land. Mark Hooks’s mother once remarked in wonder, "the trees reach right up to the sky." Another challenge was the weather. Most of the black farmers were accustomed to the warm climate of the American South. "They didn’t bring the proper clothes for Canadian winter," says Hooks. "They would wrap gunny sacks around their feet to keep them warm." In Oklahoma, farmers might get two or three crops from their vegetable garden. In Canada they might be able to grow only one. However, wild game was more plentiful and helped many settlers survive their first hard winter.

Perhaps a greater obstacle than the physical demands of clearing the land and surviving the winter was the prejudice that blacks encountered north of the Canada-United States border. Between 1910 and 1914, during the largest exodus of blacks from Oklahoma, politicians like Frank Oliver and organizations like the Edmonton Board of Trade and Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IOE) spearheaded campaigns to keep blacks out of Alberta. While these efforts didn’t translate into federal legislation, blacks were made to feel unwelcome.

Like many homesteaders, blacks often had to work in Edmonton for at least part of the year to help support their families. However, the jobs they were given were often dangerous or degrading. "People wouldn’t give them good jobs—only housecleaning and shining shoes. They were glorified house workers." Blacks also worked on the High Level Bridge. Yet despite their hard work and contribution to society, they faced discrimination at every turn. As Hooks writes: "There were hospitals that refused to accept blacks into nurses’ training. Some landlords refused to rent to them. Blacks were often barred from dance halls, bars, swimming pools, skating rinks, and other private and public facilities."

Hooks attributes the rise in racism during this period to the huge influx of white American settlers who brought their understanding of race relations with them when they moved to Canada. Blacks who were able to emigrate despite the subtle and not-so-subtle barriers they faced, chose to found communities far distant from Edmonton—in Amber Valley, Campsie, Wildwood, and of course Keystone. "There was good land near Edmonton, but they chose to live far away to raise their families in peace," says Hooks. In these rural communities, blacks created their own institutions. "In Keystone they built their own church—the Good Hope Baptist Mission," says Hooks. "They also built a school and established a cemetery."

Today cultivated fields have replaced the wilderness that greeted the people from Oklahoma. Records and artefacts from the Black settlers have been preserved in the Breton and District Museum, and the Keystone Cemetery, where many of the original settlers have been buried, has been restored through the efforts of people like Gwen and Mark Hooks.

But there is a bittersweet footnote to the Keystone story—now only one descendant of the black pioneers still lives and farms in the community. In search on work and new opportunities, the children of Keystone have moved away to larger urban centres or to farm elsewhere. As the area changes, there is a real fear that the history of the early black settlements may also be lost. That fear is what prompted Jim Musson, owner of Brightest Pebble Publishing, to encourage Hooks to write about Keystone.
Musson hopes that Hooks’s book won’t be the last word about black settlement in the west. "If more books about black history aren’t written, then that part of our history will go into oblivion because the people who lived it are dying. They didn’t write things down—they were too busy building homesteads. The only information we have from that era is oral."

Although the black community of Keystone may no longer exist as it once did, it remains alive in the memories and lives of its descendants. Despite cold weather, racism, and all the challenges of establishing farms and communities, there are over 10,000 black people living in Alberta, some of whom are descendants of Keystone, Amber Valley, Wildwood and Campsie. According to Gwen Hooks, the legacy they have inherited from the black pioneers is endurance and determination.

"They taught us to work and to be independent," says Hooks. "And that you have to work together to change conditions and make things better."

The *Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols* defines a "keystone" as a wedge-shaped stone placed in the top of an archway, often displaying a coat of arms. In a sense, it is a marker letting people know about the family that lives in this place. No one seems to know why Keystone was given its name. However, *The Keystone Legacy* seems an apt title for Hooks’s book. In a sense, her book has sent a message: "we were here." Her book is a coat of arms for the people who once lived in this place and made it the thriving community it is today.

*Reprinted courtesy of Debbie Culbertson and Legacy, Alberta's Cultural Heritage Magazine*