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**Negotiating Ownership in a Contested Landscape: A
Consideration of Post emancipation Black Community
Development during Jim Crow in Anderson County, Texas.**

BY SARAH LOFTUS

Introduction

The rise of black land ownership and the development of post emancipation African American communities among the plantation dominated the landscape of East Texas is a complex and diverse history that has often been homogenized (Exceptions include Sitton and Conrad 2005). While recent narratives concerned with the rural south during the Jim Crow era accurately portray a racially oppressive and violent space characterized by brutal social and economic stagnation, they often also fail to recognize the grinding struggles of rural black farmers to build community and achieve the citizenship that emancipation promised but failed miserably to deliver. Focusing on the nuances of local scale transformations in landscape and property ownership the following article considers the development of an African American community around the town of Bethel in northwest Anderson County and corresponding transformations on the adjacent Benjamin Jackson plantation. The intertwined histories of the African American community and the Benjamin Jackson plantation expand upon previous narratives of black communities in this region and long term generational investments in the land by people previously enslaved and early tenants throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

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A Brief History of the Pre-Civil War Benjamin Jackson Plantation

The Benjamin Jackson plantation was initially part of a much larger 5,000-acre plantation system owned by Benjamin Jackson's father, Frederick Stith Jackson, which spanned across much of northwest Anderson County, hugging the banks of the Trinity River (Anderson County Probate Record 1863; Crider 2011). Purchased in 1857, it produced cotton and corn, as well as subsistence crops through enslaved labor. While only operating for a few years before the outbreak of the Civil War, by 1860, 46 people were enslaved on Benjamin Jackson's plantation, possibly more by the time of Texas Emancipation in 1865 (1860 United States Census Records).

The Jacksons were originally from Virginia and arrived in Texas during the early 1850s by way of plantation ventures in Tennessee and Alabama (United States census records 1840 and 1850). The enslaved people who traveled with them experienced the deep tragedy of America's secondmiddle passage, a period of extreme disruption that further severed the fragile bonds of enslaved families and resulted in high individual mortality rates (Berlin 2003: 161; Tomich 2004: 63). A review of Texas census records traces the families of those enslaved on the Jackson plantation to Alabama and the eastern seaboard states of Virginia and Georgia (United States census records 1870 - 1940).

According to oral history provided by living descendants, as well as, primary accounts in the form of journal and newspaper articles from the 1920s and 30s authored by Walter Jackson, Benjamin Jackson's son, Benjamin Jackson, his wife Ellen Douglas Jackson and their three children lived in a house on the plantation lands throughout the Civil War. They also spent a great deal of time at his father's, Frederick Jackson, estate in Palestine, the county seat (Crider 2011, Jackson 2012; Jackson circa 1930). Conversations with descendants who have remained close to the land indicate that the main house on the Benjamin Jackson plantation burned down shortly after the Civil War (Crider 2011, Jackson 2012). The exact location of the structure remains circumspect, as do events surrounding the fire, but the home is referenced in the writing of

Walter Jackson (Jackson circa 1930).

Census records indicate that in addition to the main house there were at least eight structures housing enslaved people during the antebellum period (1860 United States Census Records). While no official records or photographs documenting construction or the layout of a slave quarters has been uncovered, historical maps refer to the far southwest corner of the plantation as “the quarter” (Figure 1 shows a hand drawn map of “the quarter” produced sometime in the 1950s by the Jackson family). Enslaved people were likely housed here, and emancipated free laborers may also have occupied this area during the initial transition to tenancy post-Civil War.

The Jacksons did not stay on the plantation for very long after Emancipation. Ellen Jackson died young shortly after the fall of the Confederacy, leaving Benjamin Jackson and their three children behind. Suffering financially as a result of the War, Jackson decided to leave Bethel and move with his young children to the burgeoning town of Springfield in adjacent Limestone County (Henry Jackson 2012). He did not frequently return to the plantation after the move, and instead acted as an absentee landowner, an arrangement that was common during this period (Jackson circa 1930).

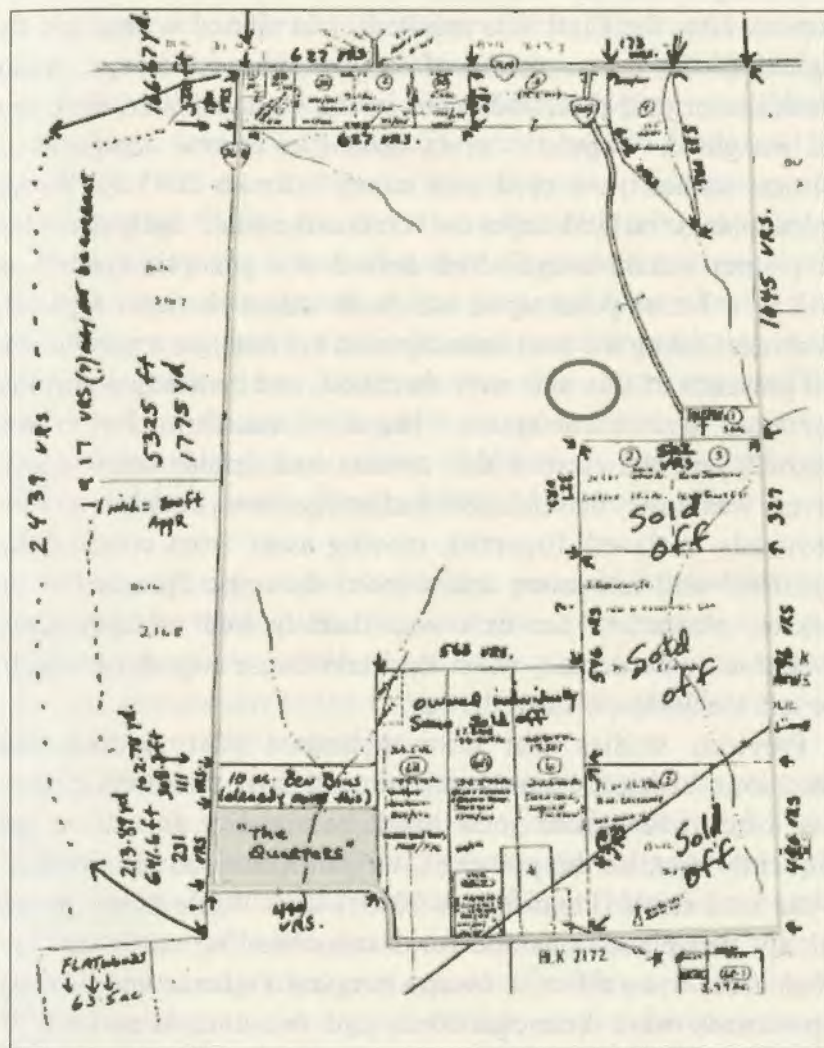


Figure 1: Map produced by the Jackson family circa 1950 showing the location of "the quarters" (in green) and the possible location of the original Benjamin Jackson family home (shown in red).

(Copy provided by Robert Crider, the current land owner, the provenience of the original is unknown).

Reorganization of the Plantation after Emancipation

Slavery's end and Benjamin Jackson's abandonment of the property after the Civil War resulted in an altered setting and the beginning of a reformulation of the plantation landscape. Adam Smith has argued that landscapes in the United States, both real and imagined, "regularly pivot around a central apparatus of political authority—a civil axis mundi" (Smith 2003:9). Within typical plantation landscapes the "civil axis mundi" aptly describes the planter's main house which served as a panoptic symbol, as well as a literal point upon which all other elements typically revolved. During the post emancipation era both the symbolic and real presence of this axis were fractured, and centrally controlled plantation agricultural systems began to transform. Power was deposed, and the control that owners had implemented during slavery was slowly disseminated and renegotiated. People who were previously enslaved dispersed, moving away from concentrated "quarters" and into more autonomous domestic spaces. On the Jackson plantation, the axis was literally and metaphorically leveled to some degree, when the main house was destroyed by fire and the Jacksons moved away.

Previous studies that have addressed post emancipation transitions during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century have often overlooked rural black community formation and frequently dismiss the power of African American relationships to the land itself (Penningroth 2003:148). While many people quickly fled plantations and rural areas heading north and into urban areas in an effort to escape rampant violence and poverty, experiences were heterogeneous, and in some situations the rural physical landscape became an immense source of strength and deep attachments to place and community formed over generations. In her 2009 essay, "Touching the Earth," Bell Hooks explored African Americans' relationships with place and in particular with the land itself, arguing they were central to survival during Jim Crow (Hooks 2009:118). Remembering her grandfather, Hooks wrote,

Working the land was the hope of survival. Even when the land was owned by white oppressors, master and mistress, it was the earth itself that protected exploited black folks from dehumanization. My sharecropping granddaddy Jerry would walk through neat rows of crops and tell me “No man can make the sun or the rains come – we can all testify. We can all see that ultimately we all bow down to the forces of nature. Big white boss may think he can outsmart nature, but the small farmer know. Earth is our witness.” This relationship to the earth meant that southern black folks, whether they were impoverished or not, knew firsthand that white supremacy, with its systemic dehumanization of blackness, was not a form of absolute power. (Hooks 2009:118)

While writing about a deeply personal experience and sentiments for the land that was not shared by everyone, Hook’s focus on people’s relationships with place and environment add new dimensions to the complexity of why people moved in different ways after emancipation.

Though white discrimination, violence, intimidation, vagrancy laws, and poverty have long been recognized as defining African Americans’ movement in this region after slavery’s end and during Jim Crow, the influence and power of local black communities and environment have been overlooked, and their roles in settlement and migration undermined. Speaking to this, historian Dylan Penningroth has argued: “black peoples fierce resistance to anything that smacked of slavery destroyed the plantation, not just as a labor system but also as a physical landscape.” Within the Bethel community, the power of the physical landscape is evident through the back and forth struggles to exercise control over the land. These struggles are explored below through a consideration of community development and property transactions as people moved out of slavery’s designated living space and established

small farmsteads. These settlements formed in family clusters that skirted the edges of the plantation near access to main roads, water sources and eventually other black neighbors, providing new measures of economic and psychological independence.

The Emergence of a Post Emancipation Black Community around the Benjamin Jackson Plantation

By the early-twentieth century the area around Bethel, where the Benjamin Jackson plantation is located, was reportedly a comparatively less violent space for African Americans to settle in contrast with neighboring towns, such as Cayuga where white supremacy politics and the Ku Klux Klan dominated (Vaughn 1967 and 2012). These political dogmas were certainly not liberated in Bethel, but this region appears to have been less outwardly violent and eventually held a majority black population (Johnson 2013, United States Census Records 1970-1940). While the surrounding threat of violence across sections of northwestern Anderson County resulted in restricted movement within certain spatial boundaries, African Americans sought to develop this marginalization to their advantage (Price 1999:334). People living within and around Bethel appear to have used a semi-imposed landscape of social marginality to develop insulated communities that afforded protection, but also, and perhaps more significantly generated social, economic, and cultural opportunities among community members. As has been pointed out by Maria Franklin, the autonomy of rural black communities resulted just as much from an internal desire to commune with people with a shared history, experience, and cultural background, as it was a response to white racism (Franklin 2012:30).

To advance community and solidify space within the region residents persistently negotiated with the white land owning population to acquire greater control over the local landscape through the purposeful acquisition and planned development of key properties and infrastructure including a cemetery, school, and churches that cemented and furthered community growth. Negotiations also took place internally among members of the black

community, who had diverse economic and social backgrounds and were not necessarily a unified group (Kelley 1996). While the area around Bethel was initially populated by sharecroppers and wage laborers working commercial cotton and corn on white-owned land, by the turn of the twentieth century, this demographic shifted to include a mix of prominent black landowners, small land owners, tenants, and laborers.

Black Land Ownership – Struggles and Success

The rise of black property ownership following decades of sharecropping and tenancy was crucial to successful community formation, and opportunities to purchase land were prioritized by many people. Immediately following the Civil War, tenancy dominated northwestern Anderson County and appears to have continued with no exceptions on the Benjamin Jackson plantation through the beginning of the twentieth century. This system remained unaltered until Jackson's death in April of 1914, and the shift of control of the lands to his sons, Walter and Douglas Jackson (Texas Death Certificate 1914). Within a year of Benjamin Jackson's passing, his sons began selling parcels of former plantation lands to black families and individuals, many of whom were already established tenants.

One exception to this is the Jackson Quarters Cemetery, which Benjamin Jackson deeded to the black community in 1899 for a sum of fifteen dollars (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 65, Page 221). The cemetery dates to the antebellum period, but remains active today and contains the unmarked graves of enslaved people as well as the burials of local community members interred as recently as 2014. The cemetery was the first of many tracts eventually subsumed by the black community, but the only parcel that Benjamin Jackson would actually convey. The unwillingness of former plantation owners to sell land to African Americans was a common phenomenon across the south, and Penningroth has argued,

....although most ex-masters understood that the war had ended their property rights in black people, they never the less expected to keep their wide claims over land and movable property. These claims had formed the basis of the slave economy, and their general belief was that if they could hold onto them, they would effectively keep blacks under their thumb. (Penningroth 2003:142)

The initial cemetery transaction between Benjamin Jackson and the black community marks the beginning of decades of officially documented negotiations that took place regarding how the post emancipation landscape was to be occupied and controlled. Unlike some previous narratives concerned with tenancy in Texas, in which renters are primarily depicted as living in a largely unorganized and mobile fashion with few attachments to the land, people in the Bethel area actively invested in the long term. Community members, including both new black landowners, and long-term tenants slowly and persistently laid down roots in the community and over generations acquired more control over property and infrastructure. The process was long, drawn out, imperfect, and marked by both successes and failures. The initial cemetery purchase exemplifies these tensions. While the purchase was a victory for the black community, the deed itself was subject to stipulations that ensured that while officially transferring responsibility for the cemetery's upkeep, Benjamin Jackson still ultimately remained in control of the property. The land "is to be used only as a cemetery and for nothing else, and if it is used for anything else the land will revert back to me or my heirs" (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 65, Page 221). This paternalistic overreach prevented the black community from exercising true ownership over the cemetery, and would have limited their control of the burial grounds both in a literal sense as well as a deeply psychological one.

The apparent shift that occurred after Benjamin Jackson's death regarding the sale of land to black tenants and neighbors was likely the result of a combination of economic and social factors.

This included the persistence and determination of the local black population to secure land in order to successfully establish community and infrastructure over generations, changes in social attitudes among the next generation of the Jackson family, a decrease in the land value of the sandy soils in this area which had suffered from cotton production, as well as, the movement of former plantation owning families into new business ventures in urban areas. In the following section land transactions that took place during the years 1914 – 1935 between Benjamin Jackson's sons and the local black community are considered (Figure 2). These negotiations, which are primarily evidenced through deed of sale records available at the Anderson County Courthouse, serve as a means to demonstrate the transformation and mediation of the landscape in relation to property ownership and control.



Figure 2: 1933 Aerial showing parcels of land on the Benjamin Jackson plantation sold by the Jackson brothers to African Americans during the early-twentieth century (Drawing by S. Loftus, 1933 Tobin Aerial Photograph, Anderson County Deed Records)

African Americans Begin to Buy Land on the Benjamin Jackson Plantation

Tillis Washington was the first African American to purchase land on the Benjamin Jackson plantation. Washington's history is largely absent from official records, and he only appears in the Texas census in the year 1900. At that time he was 21 and living with his mother and stepfather, Jana and Robert Govan, who were tenant farmers in the Fifth Precinct, an area that includes the Benjamin Jackson plantation (1900 United States Census Records). The conveyance took place on November 15, 1915. Washington purchased 25 acres of land in the far northwest corner of the plantation (Figure 2). The deed of sale was not located at the court house, so how much money was exchanged and the terms of the purchase are not known; however, an oil and gas lease from March of 1928, references the transaction. The lease indicates that Washington established a house and barn on the property and documents the sale of the lands oil and gas rights to R. R. Jackson, a white physician and descendant of Benjamin Jackson.

In lieu of money, the mineral rights exchange covered \$150 Washington owed Dr. Jackson for treatment of his "sore leg" (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 140, Page 94). Based on inflation rates this translates to roughly \$3,500 today, a fairly expensive medical treatment. Negotiations of this type were not unusual during this period and demonstrate the lack of currency exchanged within rural East Texas communities. The deal also provides evidence of an underlying battle that was just beginning, but continues to characterize much of East Texas today, control over rich deposits of oil, coal, and natural gas that lie below the surface. Records indicate it was not uncommon for debts to be settled through the sale of mineral rights, and in addition to the possibility of eventual monetary gain through extraction, provided previous owners with a degree of control over their former lands.

Negotiations that took place regarding the settlement of land debt, and in some instances foreclosure, further exemplify the back and forth struggle of many African Americans to gain

independence through property ownership and maintain that independence. It appears that Washington eventually forfeited the 25 acres of land on which he established his homestead and today the parcel is back in the hands of the Jackson family. Documentation of this final transaction was not found in the archival record and it is possible the foreclosure may have happened after his death. Struggles to maintain ownership of land once it was purchased plagued many black families who bought property either from the Jacksons or from other white families in the area. People frequently lacked the capital to pay for land in full and warranty deeds typically came with attached vendor's liens and steep interest rates that were difficult to meet in a discriminatory rural economy that was characterized by little monetary wealth and exchange.

Less than a month after selling the first 25 acre tract of land to Washington, the Jackson brothers sold another parcel to Bruce Glenn; a one-acre tract in the far northeast corner of the plantation. The acre housed the community's first African American school, the Green Street School, and was not far from Washington's tract, which was also located along the northern property line (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 135, Page 439). The Glens eventually became one of the most prominent black landowning families in this part of Anderson County. Bruce Glenn's father and mother, Reverend Jessie and Catherine Glenn, already owned 200 acres of land across the street from the Green Street School, abutting the Jackson plantation on the north side. These lands had been purchased in 1902 and 1909 from Ben Gee and M. J. Derden, respectively, both white landowners in the area (Anderson County Deed Records, Volume 71, Page 343 and Volume 72, Page 102). Figure 3 illustrates the Glenn's acreage and the location of the Green Street School.

The purchase of the school provided the community with ownership and governance over the space where their children were educated. Reverend E. N. Glenn, a descendant of Jessie and Catherine Glenn described the historic Green Street School as

a one-teacher school taught by Mrs. Maggie Vance and located across the public road from the late Rev. Glenn's, sawmill, canemill, and store. In later years it was named Bethel and then moved to another public road now FM2707 (Palestine Negro Business and Professional Women's Club 1989:14).

Prioritizing the purchase of the school and acquiring the Jackson Quarters cemetery allowed African American residents to gain control of important elements of basic infrastructure and suggested careful planning to acquire key properties as important steps towards building independence. It also suggested willingness by the Jackson family to relinquish control and let go of spaces within the plantation landscape that were clearly an established part of the black community.

In January of 1916, Walter and Douglas Jackson sold another parcel of land to Charlie Norris, this time a ten acre tract at the opposite end of the plantation near the southern boundary. Norris paid \$25 in cash and agreed to pay two vendor's liens with eight percent interest totaling \$200 (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 142, Page 571). A year later in January of 1917 the Jackson's sold him an additional adjoining 22.4 acres for ten dollars in cash and \$326 in vendor's liens with the same interest rate (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 142, Page 570). This left Norris with a total of 33.4-acres. Included within Norris's purchase, was the previously mentioned "quarters" depicted in Figure 1, the probable location of the eight "slave houses" listed on the 1860 census records. As with the Green Street School and the Jackson Quarters cemetery, this parcel of land was strongly tied to the African American community, and may partially account for why Charlie Norris wanted to buy it and also why the Jackson's were willing to sell it. Establishing ownership over an area where African Americans, and quite possibly Norris's relatives, were enslaved may have held some redemptive and symbolic meaning not only for Norris, but the entire black community.

Eleven months after selling “the quarters” to Norris, the Jackson brothers sold an additional five tracts of land, totaling 154.5-acres. Two of the subject tracts were sold to other members of the Glenn family. Bruce Glenn acquired an additional nineteen acres surrounding the Green Street School that secured an insulating buffer around the original one-acre piece of land. The same year, his brother Mathew Glenn purchased 12.5 acres also located along the northern boundary of the plantation and abutting Tillis Washington’s property on the east (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 135, Page 439 and Volume 116, Page 475). The land has a perennial stream running through it that would have been useful for agriculture both on Mathew Glenn’s land, and possibly across the street on his parent’s larger 200 acre farm. While unoccupied today, descendants of the Glenns still grow hay on the property.

In 1916 the Jackson brothers began selling additional tracts of land on the southern end of the plantation. One of which was a 40 acres tract in the far southeast corner purchased by Caldonia Jackson; an African American woman whom historical records indicate was single and divorced (Figure 3.1; Anderson County Deed Records Volume 116, Page 350). Her brother, Ben Cummins, also purchased property from the Jacksons. 53 acres located immediately north of his sister’s 40 acre tract (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 116, Page 354). Caldonia Jackson’s ability to purchase land given society’s discriminatory attitudes towards woman, divorce, and people of color is remarkable. Census records indicate her parents were from Alabama, where the white Jackson’s had a plantation prior to settling in Texas, and along with her last name, this suggests a possible long-term relationship with the Jackson family.

The history of Caldonia Jackson and her brother Ben Cummins is interesting and remains shrouded in mystery. Additional research and oral history with community members and descendants may eventually shed more light on their family’s story. Neither Caldonia Jackson nor Ben Cummins appear in any Texas census

records prior to 1900, but in 1880 a man named Jesse Cummins was living in Precinct 5 next-door to John H. Gee, a cousin of Benjamin Jackson and one of the presumed overseers of his plantation. Cummins is described as "mulatto." The designation of mulatto possibly allowed the family access to white community members that other African American families did not have, and a familial relationship may have existed. While purely speculative, this possibly may have provided some advantage in negotiating the sale of land. Historic and contemporary ideas concerning "race" are blurry and problematic and it is beyond the scope of this article to address this important issue, but it should be clear that my use of the terms black, African American, white, and Anglo European speak to social and cultural constructions of race, not inherent biological differences. For an idea of the complexity of the genealogy of people in this area of Texas, I'll refer to a conversation I had with a woman in Tennessee Colony, just outside of Bethel, who self-associates as African American, but has ancestry that is African, Anglo European, and Blackfoot Indian (for further reading on race in America see Ferrante and Browne 2001 and Delgado and Stefancic 2001).

Caldonia Jackson and Ben Cummins were both tenants on the Benjamin Jackson plantation prior to purchasing land from the Jackson brothers and lived next-door to Charles Alexander, one of the men who represented the black community in the sale of the Jackson Quarters Cemetery (United States Census Records 1900). Records indicate Caldonia Jackson's husband, Samuel John Jackson, died sometime prior to 1900 and she and her brother, Ben Cummins, who was single at the time, shared a household (United States Census Records 1900). Together, it appears they developed a plan for acquiring their own land within the community.

In 1901, Ben Cummins bought his first parcel, 100 acres located near the eastern boundary of the Benjamin Jackson plantation (Figure 3). The land was purchased from John H. Regan for \$200 with a vendor's lien and 10% interest (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 69, Page 308). A year later, after having satisfied

the lien on the 100 acres, Regan sold Cummins an additional 50 acre adjoining tract (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 74, Page 574). Over the next several years, Ben Cummins and his sister Caldonia Jackson appear to have developed a successful farming enterprise on the property and five years later purchased another 75 acre tract in the same area, this time abutting Benjamin Jackson's eastern plantation boundary (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 85, Page 231). After Benjamin Jackson passed away, and his sons began selling plantation land, the family purchased what may have constituted their original home place as tenants, a purchase that was likely economically fruitful as well as psychologically and emotionally redemptive. With the final purchase of the previously mentioned 40 acres by Caldonia Jackson and 53 acres by Ben Cummins in 1916, the family had secured 318 acres of farmland, a significant amount of land for a small farmer in east Texas (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Lands owned by the Cummins (yellow) and Glenn Families (blue) located on and around the former Benjamin Jackson Plantation (Drawing by S. Loftus, Anderson County Deed Records, Google Earth 2014)

Around the time that Jackson and Cummins acquired their 40 and 53 acre parcels, the Jackson brothers sold additional parcels of land to two other African American community members. Ruben Alexander acquired a 73 acre tract along the southern end of the plantation located between Caldonia Jackson and Charlie Norris, and a 30 acre tract was sold to Billy Jones located adjacent to the Jackson Quarters Cemetery (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 120, Page 175 and Volume 115, Page 631). In 1920, one final 15 acre parcel, adjacent to Billy Jones and Ruben Alexander's land, was sold

to Levi and Delia Terry. After this sale, the brothers stopped selling lands on the Benjamin Jackson plantation. In general, the property the Jackson's sold skirted the perimeter of the original plantation and the parcels were concentrated along the northern and southern boundaries, and along the eastern edge, near the Jackson Quarters Cemetery (Figures 2 and 3). This allowed the Jackson family to remain in control of the central area and descendants continue to own this property today. Though no members of Benjamin Jackson's immediate known family lived on the plantation permanently during the late-nineteenth and twentieth century, a hunting camp was built on the property and became a sort of secondary axis-mundi after the main house burned down. During the early-twentieth century the Jacksons frequented the camp and oversaw several African American tenants who were living on the lands through the mid-twentieth century. The African American families who remained in tenancy situations and did not purchase property worked alongside the black families who did buy land to establish, build, and maintain the Bethel community (Loftus 2015).

As previously discussed, while many individuals and families who purchased parcels of land on the Benjamin Jackson Plantation were able to hang on to their property, others were unable to meet liens outlined in the bills of sale. Official records document some of the difficulties people had making payments and meeting required interest in order to maintain their land. An analysis of the records indicates Benjamin Jackson's sons typically sold parcels for a small amount of cash up front, though not a meager sum given the context, around \$25, to be followed by a series of annual payments at 8 percent interest. Other white landowners in the area, such as John H. Reagan, sold lands at 10 percent interest, a relatively steep payment plan. In several instances the Jackson's renegotiated the terms of the vendor's liens instead of forcing foreclosure when someone could not meet payments.

Ultimately, three families who purchased lands on the Benjamin Jackson plantation during the early-twentieth century lost their titles. Tillis Washington, Levi and Delia Terry, and Cora and

Charlie Norris all eventually forfeited their properties back to the Jackson family. All three foreclosures occurred during the early 1930s, the time of the Great Depression in the United States, which had devastating effects on small farms. In one document, Delia Terry argued that the vendor's lien on her property along with the accrued interest exceeded what the land was actually worth, and therefore she would not pay it. The deed states that Ms. Terry "not being able and willing to pay of the indebtedness existing against the above described tract of land which with accrued interest is as much if not more than the land is worth" (Anderson County Deed Records Volume 234, Page 457). As previously mentioned, in events of foreclosure, people frequently sold their mineral rights and oil and gas rights in an attempt to cover interest payments. For investors, mineral rights were essentially the only monetary value that was held in lands, but for small farmers a parcel of land provided independence, a home, and a means of subsistence. These deals were just one more way that the landscape was negotiated after the Civil War and power relations played out between plantation owners and people who had suffered through slavery.

While owning land was a priority for most people in East Texas regardless of racial affiliation, this was particularly true for African Americans who were able to gain limited autonomy through purchasing land, and some relief from persistent racism. Conversations with local residents reinforce how important land ownership was within the context of Jim Crow. A descendant of the Cummins family who I had several conversations with over the course of the research told me that his family did everything they could to hold on to their land, "no matter how bad things got, you held on to your land" (Anonymous 2013). He said it was usually hard, if not impossible to get property back, once you let it go and he knew of many black families in the area that had suffered as a result of forfeiting ownership, and thus their independence.

The Establishment of Community Infrastructure

Once community members acquired land, a permanent place of worship, the Bethel Baptist Church, was established to house the local congregation. The church was organized in 1872, and members previously met in people's homes and other donated spaces. Bethel is often referred to as the "Mother Church" and several other black churches in the area eventually split off from Bethel to serve adjacent communities in northwest Anderson County (Browne 2012). Church partnerships, or covenants, as they are known in parts of East Texas, allowed for congregations to pool resources and strengthen community ties. Covenants would gather on alternating Sundays and one gospel preacher would circulate to several churches (African-American Roots 2006: 123). Covenants were common across rural East Texas and fostered communication and the development of important relationships and alliances between adjacent rural communities by providing opportunities for people to come together and discuss social, economic, and political challenges.

Bethel church was built on land owned by Ben Cummins, whose history was previously discussed. The church is referred to by present day community members as "Old" Bethel Church. The lands were not part of the original Benjamin Jackson plantation, but an adjacent parcel Cummins had purchased from John H. Regan (Anderson County Deed Record Volume 69, Page 308). According to local history, M. C. Hunter was the first reverend at the new location. The Hunter family owned 300 acres to the south of the Cummins land, a parcel that remains in the family and is currently occupied by two of M. C. Hunter's daughters and a grandchild, one of whom, Mrs. Johnson was generous enough to allow me to record her oral history (Johnson 2013). While the original wood frame structure of the Bethel Church has been covered with a brick façade, it remains standing and continues to serve the community (Figure 3.11). Two long-time congregation members in their late 80s and early 90s recalled the way the

community slowly acquired brick for the façade from a local kiln in Athens as funds became available, and how people gathered on weekends to build the façade as well as a concrete wheel-chair ramp that leads to the front door (Johnson 2013).



Figure 4: Old Bethel Baptist Church and New Bethel Baptist Church
(S. Loftus 2014)

A second church, New Bethel Baptist Church, was established down the street in 1916 (Figure 4). New Bethel was formed by members of the original Bethel Church who shared a difference of opinion on how the church should operate. Oral tradition offers that the new congregation originally met in an old log cabin, until they acquired two acres of land from Caldonia Jackson in 1918 located on the former Benjamin Jackson Plantation (African American Roots 2006: 424). Jesse Glenn, the prominent land owner previously discussed, was one of the original trustees of New Bethel Church and provided the lumber as well as carpentry skills for its construction. Glenn also served as the first pastor of New Bethel (African American Roots 2006: 424). Tillis Washington, the first person to purchase a homestead on the Benjamin Jackson plantation was also an original trustee (Anderson County Deed Record Volume 120, Page 563).

Bethel and New Bethel Church continue to operate today and community members often go to services at both, attending on alternating Sundays depending on the pastor's schedule (Johnson 2013). The Bethel School was built next to the original Bethel

Church and served as a replacement for the original Green Street School. Ben Cummins is believed to have been the first teacher and principal, receiving a teaching certificate from Austin in 1892. The school operated until integration took place here in the early 1970s and children were required to attend school in Cayuga. The Bethel school is no longer extant, but the concrete foundation remains visible, and the lunch room, a single story wood-frame structure remains standing. Next to the lunchroom is another structure that housed the local African American fraternal organization, the Order of the Eastern Star, a group that included hundreds of area members during the early-twentieth century.

The African American community in Bethel thrived during the first half of the twentieth century through people's combined efforts to acquire land, develop infrastructure and create informal exchange economies that empowered people to survive in the environment of Jim Crow. The formation of a somewhat insulated community landscape within a context of extreme racism enabled and provided support for successive generations to engage in opportunities both within and outside of the community. "Grass-roots institutions such as mutual benefit associations, fraternal organizations, and religious groups not only helped people with basic survival needs, but created sustained bonds of fellowship, mutual support networks, and a collectivist ethos that ultimately informed black working-class political struggle" (Kelley 1996: 38). Conversations with locals in Bethel indicate that people survived and in some instances prospered through communal solidarity. There was little monetary wealth or exchange during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, however people regularly exchanged goods and services. Families often specialized in certain commodities or labor and these informal economies allowed people to survive in the face of economic challenges and segregation. People who grew up during the 1930s and 40s recalled how one family might have sweet potatoes, and another milk. In terms of labor, one family may have a well digger, one a

syrup maker, and another a blacksmith. Medical needs were also met in this way and according to local history Caldonia Jackson, whose property history was discussed above, was a midwife for the community (African American Roots 2006). As one woman I spoke with several times described it, “you knew your own family’s needs and you could also anticipate what other families needed” (Anonymous 2013). This internal economy and communal self-reliance ran counter to the capitalist ideals of individual property and wage labor that were engrained in other parts of the United States, particularly in urban settings.

The Mechanization of Farming and Communal Decline

The introduction of mechanization coupled with industrialization, the burgeoning of the oil and gas industry, and the rise in abundant, cheap, mass produced and readily available goods all contributed to the demise and shift away from the informal economies that bound small rural communities together. When asked why people started to leave the community, one local resident had this to say,

Well, it wasn’t nothing down here at the time! We couldn’t make a living. There wasn’t enough farming...And then later on there was something came out they called the cotton picker. Well, we didn’t have to pick cotton no more. They would pick it with their cotton picker, which they still use it. They could pick more with that stripper in a day then fifty of us could pick in a month! And so that put us out of business of pulling cotton (Johnson 2013).

This shift in labor coupled with other economic, social, and cultural milieu led to a rapid decline in small farms and ultimately ended small farming and tenancy as it existed in the late-nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Altered forms of farm labor endured on large scale commercial farms, but in many cases in even more tenuous forms, with much of the labor being performed by migrant workers, particularly

people seeking employment from Mexico and South America. Additionally, during the post-World War II period many black men who fought overseas and experienced equality in Europe, including those from the Bethel community returned to a deeply segregated East Texas and decided there was nothing there for them, opting instead to move to urban areas and out west.

Ironically, community decline was further accelerated in many ways by integration, which brought opportunity, but also necessarily fractured the communal ties and insulation that people had built up over decades. Integration was resisted by both blacks and whites alike in this area, and during an informal conversation, one local African American resident told me that in his opinion integration was one of the worst things that happened to the community (Anonymous 2013). While in theory and in some cases reality, integration corrected the gross fallacy of "separate but equal," it also necessarily fissured ties that bound small rural black communities together by closing local schools, which were important centers of communal learning and action and instead centralized people into a controlled institutionalized environment that was disconnected from elder community members.

The exploration of oil, natural gas, and coal accelerated throughout the twentieth century, and what was once farm land began to be bought and sold for mineral rights alone. Today the landscape is marked by massive energy related infrastructure and pipelines as well as pumping stations that have replaced what was once an agricultural landscape. Tenancy ceased on the Benjamin Jackson plantation in the 1950s. Cattle were run on the land through the 1970s, but today it is designated as an unofficial wildlife refuge, crisscrossed by pipelines, and populated by dense scrub and new growth forest.

The Bethel Community Today

While many people moved away from the Bethel community and other rural communities in this area during the second half of the twentieth century, and into larger cities in Texas or out of state,

others have stayed, maintaining the local churches which continue to serve as centers of community. Some people eventually returned to Bethel after years of living elsewhere. One elderly man who recently moved back with his wife told me, "I wanted to come back home, before they brought me home." This is a sentiment that seems to be shared by many people (Anonymous 2013). During my interview with Ms. Johnson she had the following to say about the landscape in the 1930s and people's decisions to move back to it today,

There wasn't nobody in the community then but African Americans. Wasn't nobody around here but us. Everybody had homes 'round here, and all this, as far as you can go down there, was just houses, houses. Where this oil well is? Well, it was the Jackson houses, and all that [referring to Caldonia Jackson]. But they died out, and them died out, moved to town. And it just ain't too many people, just—and what few you see now is coming back in. Just like the Nollie farm up there? It's seven houses, seven of the Nollie kids have come back on their daddy's place. One, two, three, four of us have come back on our daddy's place, because Sherry Ann up here, she came from Houston back here. I came back from Hillsboro. And Michael, he had been here a long time. And Mary, she came back from California. She lived in California at one time, and she came back home (Ms. Johnson 2013).

While the landscape has transitioned throughout the last century and many people have moved away, the sense of community, family, and place that was built over the generations remains strong among some and offers people a place of return. The lands continue to embody the diverse history of generations emerging from the shadowy legacy of slavery to find a way forward in a society that was dominated by Jim Crow.

Conclusions

Writing about landscape in the late 1970s when cultural geographers were beginning to encourage a more humanistic approach to place Edward Relph wrote,

Landscape is not merely an aesthetic background to life, rather it is a setting that both expresses and conditions cultural attitudes and activities, and significant modifications to landscapes are not possible without major changes in social attitudes (Relph 1976:122).

The ways that the Benjamin Jackson Plantation lands were divided, sold, built, lived in and abandoned during the century that followed the Civil War provide evidence of shifting social and economic realities, and demonstrate a slow transformation that occurred over multiple generations as people grappled with what the politics of freedom actually meant within a landscape previously dominated by slavery and awash in the racial disparities that plagued the United States throughout Jim Crow. These discourses in many ways mirror broader struggles across the colonized world as the politics of modernity and the emergence of the citizen individual coincided with the rise of industrial capitalism and the end of state sanctioned slavery (Bender 2002: 104; Delle 1998). They also complicate traditional narratives concerned with the transformation of plantations in the rural southern United States which have obscured the complexity and diversity of peoples experiences during the period that some have referred to as the New South (1880–1940) and during the post-WWII era leading up to the 1960s Civil Rights movement (Aiken 1998:16).

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