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Blackdom: Interpreting the Hidden History of New Mexico's Black Town

Austin J. Miller

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**BLACKDOM: INTERPRETING THE HIDDEN HISTORY
OF NEW MEXICO'S BLACK TOWN**

By

AUSTIN JOSEPH MILLER

B.A., Honors Interdisciplinary Liberal Arts and History, *summa cum laude*,
University of New Mexico, 2015

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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DEDICATION

For Ken and Lisa, with love and gratitude for their many sacrifices.

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ABSTRACT

This master's thesis recovers the history of Blackdom, New Mexico. Founded by an African American family from Georgia, Blackdom is a ghost town that existed in the early decades of the twentieth century near Roswell, New Mexico. Blackdom was initially imagined as both a refuge from the hostilities of Jim Crow society and as a for-profit enterprise. Entanglement in land-fraud scandals hindered the town's early development, but Blackdom eventually grew to nearly three hundred residents, with its own school, Baptist church, post office, and general store. Blackdom settlers practiced a variety of agricultural methods, including dry farming and irrigation from shallow wells, but drought eventually doomed this unique community. This study engages Blackdom's history through three distinct lenses: community, race, and environment. It explores how Blackdom was envisioned and created, discusses the role of race in both internal and external perceptions of the community, examines the volatile environment of the Pecos Valley that contributed to Blackdom's collapse, and connects this hidden history to memorial attempts that emerged nearly a century after Blackdom was established.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
I CREATING A COMMUNITY	7
II REVISITING RACE.....	30
III FOR WANT OF WATER	53
EPILOGUE: MISSING MEMORIALS	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY	96

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1 William Proffitt's residence on his Blackdom homestead, circa 1908.....	24
Fig. 1.2 Sunday school class at Blackdom Baptist Church, circa 1909.....	25
Fig. 1.3 Blackdom Townsite Plat, May 28, 1920	28
Fig. 2.1 Roswell Pioneer Klan's entry in the 1926 Cotton Carnival parade.....	49
Fig. 3.1 Artesian well next to the Pecos Valley and Northeastern Railroad depot, 1892.....	64
Fig. 3.2 Artesian well near Main Street in Roswell, circa 1895	66
Fig. 3.3 Well and piston pump near Blackdom homestead	74
Fig. 3.4 Abandoned Blackdom Baptist Church, date unknown.....	78
Fig. 4.1 Scattered rubble and foundations of a Blackdom homestead.....	83
Fig. 4.2 Preliminary designs for the Cahoon Park memorial.....	84
Fig. 4.3 Blackdom Townsite historical marker.....	86
Fig. 4.4 Gregory Waits, Blackdom Memorial Gardens design, Southeast perspective, Lloyd & Associates Architects, May 19, 2009.....	92
Fig. 4.5 Blackdom homestead cellar, now filled with scrap wood	94

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps nowhere in the world is the natural setting nobler than in New Mexico . . . Here if anywhere is air, sky, earth fit to constitute a gracious homeland, not alone for those who occupy themselves in the world's work, but as well for those who study and create, for those who play, those who sit still to brood and dream.

—Ross Calvin, *Sky Determines*

At the turn of the twentieth century, New Mexico became a “gracious homeland” for a wave of African American migrants who flocked to a blossoming settlement called Blackdom. Aside from the uniqueness of the community itself, which comprised the only all-black settlement in New Mexico’s history, the name chosen for the community also strikes a distinctive chord. Most black towns founded during this period were named after inspirational figures in African American history or to honor individuals who played instrumental roles in each town’s establishment. Instead, the name “Blackdom” invoked an aura of power, wealth, and independence, concepts that were largely unfamiliar—yet deeply attractive—to a population that found itself technically free, but often confined within repressive systems of labor and political disfranchisement.

Officially founded in 1903, the community of Blackdom prospered briefly on the windswept plains near Roswell, New Mexico, before gradually succumbing to environmental and economic pressures in the 1920s. The town’s principal figure, Francis Marion Boyer, was born around 1870 in Hancock County, Georgia. He was the fifth of seven children raised by former slaves Henry and Hester Boyer.¹ Like his father, who had served as a wagoner with Alexander Doniphan’s Missouri Volunteers during the U.S.-Mexican War, Frank Boyer

¹ 1880 U.S. Census, Hancock County, Georgia, District 118, population schedule, p. 51, dwelling 431, family 500, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 6, 2018, <https://ancestry.com>.

enlisted in the Army as a young man.² During his stint as a member of the 24th Infantry, he saw combat in the Indian Territories and helped erect parts of Fort Huachuca in Arizona Territory. When he returned to Georgia, Boyer graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta with a bachelor's degree in education and pursued graduate studies at Fisk University in Nashville. He met Ella McGruder during his time in Atlanta, and they married in 1894.³ The couple settled in Pelham, Georgia and welcomed several children into their growing family. Six years later, when life in the Jim Crow South finally became unbearable, Boyer uprooted his family in search of self-determination on New Mexico's distant frontier.⁴

From January to October of 1900, Boyer and his friend, Daniel Keys, trekked from Georgia to New Mexico Territory. The two men frequently stopped to work odd jobs during their ten-month journey, sending most of their earnings home and saving what little they could toward a modest piece of land capable of supporting a free and prosperous community. Boyer's wife and children joined him in New Mexico in 1901.⁵ After nearly three years of toil and setbacks, Boyer's nebulous vision slowly began to materialize in the Pecos Valley after he and twelve partners incorporated the Blackdom Townsite Company in 1903.⁶ This marked the first stage of Blackdom's existence, in which its founders imagined a community

² Jeff Berg, "Quest for Freedom: Early Black Settlements Made a Dream Come True," in *African American History in New Mexico: Portraits from Five Hundred Years*, ed. Bruce A. Glasrud (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 111-12.

³ "Vado Negro Claims to be Head of Largest Family in State," *Las Cruces (NM) Sun News*, March 30, 1947.

⁴ 1900 U.S. Census, Mitchell County, Georgia, Pelham, District 62, population schedule, p. 275, dwelling 99, family 105, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed February 8, 2018, <https://ancestry.com>.

⁵ Maisha Baton and Henry Walt, *A History of Blackdom, N.M., in the Context of the African-American Post-Civil War Colonization Movement*. (Santa Fe: Office of Cultural Affairs, Historic Preservation District, 1996), 5.

⁶ "Articles of Incorporation," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, September 12, 1903

that would offer African Americans shelter from the oppression of Jim Crow society, improve the lives of its residents through religious and educational uplift, and ultimately become a profit-making enterprise.

After an initial period of struggle, during which the Blackdom Townsite Company became entangled in a series of land-fraud scandals, the community of Blackdom eventually grew to nearly three hundred residents. Several basic institutions sprouted, including a Baptist church, general store, schoolhouse, and post office. These buildings, and the various services they provided, connected the scattered homesteads, transforming Blackdom from a nebulous concept to an actual community. The families who homesteaded in the Blackdom area pursued a variety of agricultural strategies, including dry farming, importing water, and artesian irrigation. During years of plentiful rainfall, Blackdom farmers produced an assortment of subsistence crops. Ultimately, however, each of these tactics proved futile. When the rains dwindled, Blackdom was located too far from the Pecos River to rely on surface water, and the depleted water table and geological formation of the Pecos Valley eventually rendered shallow artesian wells impracticable.

The community's demise first began around 1916, when drought conditions, crop blight, and accumulating financial woes slowly forced the departure of many families. Despite these challenges, Frank and Ella Boyer successfully filed the Blackdom Townsite Plat in 1920. By the late 1920s, however, Blackdom had been largely reduced and abandoned. A diaspora followed the town's gradual dissolution. Some founding families, including the Boyers, moved to the Mesilla Valley, where they helped to establish the town of Vado, New Mexico. Many were absorbed into the nearby communities of Roswell, Dexter, Hagerman, and Artesia. Others scattered across the western United States. Today,

only scattered refuse and a lonely highway marker memorialize the unfulfilled aspirations of the town's former inhabitants.

Compared to the scholarly and popular attention that other black towns in the West garner, Blackdom has been largely neglected in both the historical record and the public consciousness. Although regrettable, this reality is not entirely surprising given the community's physical absence and the challenges of documenting such a remote place. Aside from a handful of works based on original research, much of what has been written about Blackdom is recycled from the same set of oral histories and early secondary accounts. Due to the relative dearth of primary archival sources, this history has become partially hidden from view, disguised beneath layers of historical and journalistic regurgitation.⁷ It is impossible to tell Blackdom's story without engaging this predominant narrative, but in instances where such intersections are unavoidable, the following chapters attempt to creatively incorporate new source material and apply fresh conceptual approaches to Blackdom's hidden history.

This project brings Blackdom's fragmented existence into focus through the application of three distinct lenses: community, race, and environment. The first chapter explores the creation of community in Blackdom, highlighting the disparate methods through which its founders imagined and constructed their vision of a utopian settlement. Speculation and profit deeply affected this initial period of Blackdom's history, as land-fraud scandals and legal proceedings hindered widespread settlement until around 1911. Eventually, newspaper advertisements and physical isolation allowed Blackdom to attract settlers and

⁷ See Baton and Walt, *History of Blackdom*; Elvis E. Fleming and Minor S. Huffman, eds., *Roundup on the Pecos* (Roswell, NM: Chaves County Historical Society, 1978), 174-78; Daniel Gibson, "Blackdom," *New Mexico Magazine*, February 1986: 46-51; Jeff Berg, "Quest for Freedom," 111-15.

develop outside the strictures of white society. Community institutions—primarily church and school—connected distant neighbors, forming ties of interdependence and cooperation. The Blackdom post office, in turn, connected Blackdom to the outside world through money transfers and mail-order supplies. These interactions transformed Blackdom from dream to reality, but when they faltered, Blackdom dwindled in size until it existed only on paper and in memory.

Chapter two analyzes the racial climate that confronted the settlers who populated Blackdom. As a refuge from the oppression of Jim Crow legal and social conventions, Blackdom succeeded largely through insulation and self-sufficiency. Racial tensions were certainly present throughout the town's lifespan, and the wave of hostility that Blackdom initially experienced eventually subsided and was replaced by widespread indifference and occasional amity. In the town's waning years, the rise of a local Ku Klux Klan chapter and resurgent emphasis on racial segregation confronted former Blackdom settlers who were forced to abandon their homesteads and enter surrounding communities in search of employment and social services. Newspaper accounts and oral histories provide an overview of the ways that Blackdom settlers viewed themselves—as well as how they were perceived and treated by their overwhelmingly white neighbors.

Chapter three transitions to the natural environment of the lower Pecos Valley. The rise and fall of the southwestern cattle kingdoms and the discovery of artesian water transformed both the ecological and economic structure of the region. As a result of these shifts, Blackdom settlers encountered an ecosystem destabilized by extraction, changing climate, and rapid population influx. Despite valiant adaptation efforts and stubborn resilience in the face of such adversity, Blackdom settlers suffered from a confluence of

meteorological, chronological, geographical, and economic misfortune that undermined the town's long-term viability. This combination of woes slowly forced Blackdom's residents to revert from self-sustaining agriculture to wage work in nearby towns. When the institutions of post office, church, and school gradually closed their doors, the community became irreparably fractured. Without water, services, and viable sources of income, Blackdom settlers slowly deserted their homesteads for better prospects elsewhere—even though this relocation often meant reentering a society in which they were relegated to second-class status.

Finally, the epilogue connects the history of Blackdom to its tenuous position in the public consciousness. Various attempts to memorialize the travails and accomplishments of Blackdom pioneers emerged nearly a century after the town's establishment. The mixture of minor success and severe disappointment that accompanied each of these movements forms a mirror image of the overarching Blackdom narrative. Despite the sincere efforts of activists, community organizers, and elected officials—poor planning, lack of funding, and unfortunate timing doomed all but one of these blossoming memorial endeavors. At its core, Blackdom represents a dichotomy of conflicting legacies. It summons visions of ambition, opportunity, and prosperity, which ultimately crumble and succumb to haunting memories of ruination.

I

CREATING A COMMUNITY

Blackdom existed as a physical place—but initially materialized as a fervent idea in the minds of the African American settlers who made southeastern New Mexico their home during the early decades of the twentieth century. It was developed in fits and starts, with its population peaking around three hundred in 1916. The Blackdom Townsite Company was founded and incorporated in 1903, but the first black homestead claim in the general vicinity of what would become Blackdom was filed an entire year earlier.¹ Frank and Ella Boyer, widely recognized as the driving force behind the settlement, did not move to Blackdom until 1912, and it was another eight years before they officially filed the townsite plat in 1920.² Despite intermittent periods of prosperity and growth, the individuals and families who settled around Blackdom—whose intertwined lives formed the Blackdom community—suffered recurring bouts of economic, racial, and environmental adversity. These unfortunate circumstances gradually forced settlers to leave Blackdom until only one family remained in 1930.³

Further complicating the history of Blackdom is the somewhat ambiguous distinction in the historical record between the Blackdom townsite and the actual community of

¹ “Articles of Incorporation” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, September 12, 1903; Mack Taylor, Homestead Application, September 8, 1902, Roswell Land Office, A/C 971024, Box 41, Blackdom Homestead Papers, Historical Society for Southeast New Mexico, Roswell (hereafter HSSNM).

² Blackdom Townsite Plat, May 28, 1920, Chaves County Clerk’s Office, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection.

³ “Tales of Homesteading: Hazel Parker Lives Life Independently,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, November 8, 1999.

Blackdom. Historical accounts typically conflate the two, but they were separate entities.⁴ The Blackdom Townsite Company, incorporated in 1903, and the townsite plat, filed in 1920, existed only on paper, whereas the community of Blackdom consisted of scattered families and homesteads within a radius of several miles. Thus, Blackdom straddled the boundary between physical and symbolic community. Access to advertising space in local and regional newspapers created an “imagined community” that primarily inhabited the printed page.⁵ Conversely, homesteading endeavors and the frontier institutions of school and church connected the somewhat far-flung families of the Blackdom area. Day-to-day interactions in the Blackdom general store and post office anchored people to the land and sustained the physical community of Blackdom for the better part of three decades.

Ultimately, in promoting the nebulous idea of Blackdom, its founders drew upon an established motif of the black town as a self-sustaining, prosperous refuge from the social and political grip of Jim Crow America. Although this vision never fully came to fruition, it nevertheless connected Blackdom to tendrils of African American thought and movement across time and space. During the three distinct periods of Blackdom’s history—establishment, growth, and failure—the venture corresponded with goals, strategies, and experiences of antecedent black communities.

When Reconstruction-era civil rights policies failed throughout the South in the 1870s, political divisions widened along racial fault lines. Instead of pursuing mutually advantageous economic cooperation, poor blacks and poor whites increasingly voted against

⁴ I would like to thank Elvis Fleming for pointing me toward this crucial detail during a conversation on September 12, 2017.

⁵ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

class-based self-interest, reinforcing artificial notions of racial solidarity fabricated by upper-class white society.⁶ These growing racial hostilities created a climate of political terrorism in which white citizens preyed upon former slaves who attempted to exercise newfound political and economic rights. Fear of future violence, based on searing past experiences, became the primary impetus for the migrations out of the South beginning in the 1880s.⁷

The concept of the black town is deeply ingrained throughout the historiography of the Exoduster movement. This pattern of migration to both the North and the West echoed the biblical march out of bondage toward a distant promised land, thus earning the moniker for its participants. Enclaves of black settlement that sprouted across the West after the failure of Reconstruction represented a variety of appealing possibilities for an African American population accustomed to constant subjugation by white society. Although black towns contained a specific ethnic component, they were otherwise quite similar to many other diverse, embryonic communities that proliferated across the West in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Among the first historians to investigate the black town movement was Mozell Hill, whose work on black communities in Oklahoma in the 1940s influenced multiple studies that emerged after 1970. Hill proposed that black towns shared “distinguishing features,” which could be found in most settlement experiments on the western frontier. These early communities typically fit into one of three categories:

⁶ Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 66-67. Painter’s work provides a detailed political history of the various elements that combined to force African Americans out of the South.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 191-94.

(1) “Utopian” communities, established by various religious and socio-political sects in search of freedom, and attempting to escape the social restrictions of the larger society; (2) “Boom Towns,” established as a result of the spontaneous rushes for gold, land, oil, and other natural wealth offered on the frontier; and (3) “Promoters’ Enterprises,” usually established through the promotional and enterprising efforts of individuals and groups who deliberately encouraged restless persons to migrate into the new area. In this connection . . . all-Negro communities had elements of these three patterns of community organization.⁸

Building on Hill’s foundational studies three decades later, Norman Crockett described a unique blend of economic and racial advancement as a set of interconnected tenets: “The black-town ideology, in large part formulated and expounded by promoters, sought to combine economic self-help and moral uplift with an intense pride in race, while at the same time encouraging an active role in county and state politics.”⁹ Thus, Crockett combined Hill’s initial list of utopia, boom town, and promotion scheme with his own added characteristics of racial pride and political engagement. Years later, in *Black Towns and Profit*, Kenneth Hamilton focused on the speculative nature of western black towns and the role of promotional marketing in the formation of Exoduster communities:

Economic motives, rather than racism, led to the inception of western black towns . . . The publicity given by newspapers . . . alerted speculators to the profit potential, but very few would risk tapping the black-settler market until increasing terrorist attacks, widening disfranchisement, and emerging Jim Crow laws inspired thousands of southern blacks to seek homes away from white persecution.¹⁰

Hamilton depicted the Exoduster movement as a high-risk system of venture capitalism, offering blacks an escape from the racial oppression that riddled the post-Reconstruction South. According to Hamilton, in order to be successful, western towns—both black and

⁸ Mozell C. Hill, “The All-Negro Communities of Oklahoma: The Natural History of a Social Movement” *The Journal of Negro History* 31, no. 3 (1946): 256-57.

⁹ Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), xiii-xiv.

¹⁰ Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 1.

white—depended on advantageous variables, including return on investment, accessibility of the townsite to transportation and migration routes, and the availability of natural resources.¹¹

Although none of these authors dealt directly with Blackdom in their studies, New Mexico's sole black town largely conformed to their proposed characteristics. At various points during its brief existence, Blackdom represented each of the following: a utopian refuge providing racial insulation in conjunction with moral, educational, and social advancement; a "booming" population seeking to capitalize on the natural resources of artesian irrigation and reclaimed agricultural land; a profit-making venture based on land sales and investment in the proposed colony; and an "imagined community" fueled by widespread promotional tracts and widespread advertising in newspapers around the nation. Only Crockett's particular characterization of black towns as hotbeds of political activism appears incompatible with Blackdom's history and circumstances.

Blackdom encountered many of the setbacks that plagued all western settlements, regardless of racial composition. In this unique case, however, a purely profit-based analysis, which Hamilton pursued in his study of five black towns, risks obscuring the complexity of the Blackdom community, the varied motivations that attracted settlers, and the multiplicity of factors that contributed to the venture's failure. As in most other black towns, economics, technology, race, and the environment were intimately connected throughout the Blackdom experiment.

On September 5, 1903, thirteen men led by Francis Boyer arrived at the County Clerk's office in Roswell. In the presence of notary public James M. Hervey, each of the men affixed his signature to the Articles of Incorporation of the Blackdom Townsite Company.

¹¹ Ibid., 3-4.

Four days later, the proper documents were officially filed in Santa Fe and approved by the Office of the Secretary of the Territory of New Mexico. The *Roswell Daily Record* announced the formation of the company, and its thirteen-member Board of Directors, and declared the fledgling corporation's intention to "establish and operate the town of Blackdom in Chaves county, and to conduct a negro colony in that section."¹² The Articles of Incorporation also included the following commitments:

To lay out additions and plat said townsite and additions . . . and to own, hold, sell, and improve the same . . . by means of the cultivation of crops, the growing of town and settlements and the general improvement of the inhabitants . . . to build, erect, and equip school houses, colleges, churches, and various educational and religious institutions for the improvement and upbuilding of the moral and mental condition of said colony.¹³

A similar announcement published two weeks later in the *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican* listed the officers of the Company as "F.M. Boyer, president; I.W. Jones, vice-president; D.G. Keyes, secretary, and Burrell Dickerson, treasurer."¹⁴ Boyer immediately attempted to capitalize on his newfound position, both in official and personal capacities. In a letter to the Bureau of Immigration, reprinted in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Boyer "earnestly solicited . . . advice and information" and signed his name above the title, "President, Blackdom City Townsite Company."¹⁵ By the summer of 1904, Boyer had requisitioned official stationery for the company with a pronounced header that read "Blackdom Townsite

¹² "Articles of Incorporation," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, September 12, 1903.

¹³ "Certificate: Articles of Incorporation of Blackdom Townsite Company (No. 3519)," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, September 14, 1903.

¹⁴ "The Blackdom Townsite: An Exclusive Negro Settlement to Be Located in Southern Part of Chaves County," *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*, October 1, 1903.

¹⁵ "City of Colored People," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, September 27, 1903. This is the only instance in which the Blackdom enterprise was referred to as the "Blackdom City Townsite Company."

Co., The Only Exclusive Negro Settlement in New Mexico.” On June 10, 1904, Boyer used this stationery to write a personal letter to “Messrs. Leay, Gill, and Marrow,” requesting that the men (who owned a pump manufacturing company) “make him a note for the amount” of a “jack-of-all-trades” pump engine, with which he hoped to save his crops of “cantaloupes and tomatoes.” The hand pump he had been using only reached twelve feet below the surface was not powerful enough to produce from the deeper levels of the water table. He promised to “pay for the engine,”—advertised in the company’s catalog at the price of \$166—when his harvest was mature.¹⁶

Boyer was undoubtedly the most dedicated promoter of the Blackdom venture in each of its stages, but he was also capable of using his perceived position of authority as leverage to further his own personal interests. The inclusion of his official position on “company” stationery was intended to convey a sense of authority and influence. When communicated with wider black audiences, from which he hoped to attract additional Blackdom settlers, the stationery projected the visions of growth and prosperity that swirled around the nebulous Blackdom Townsite Company. In other settings, as the letter suggests, these tactics could also be employed to address white members of society.¹⁷

In setting forth the declarations and intentions contained in the Articles of Incorporation, the person or persons who crafted the document (likely Frank Boyer) directly engaged several of the established principles shared by other black towns formed during the Great Migration out of the South. In its original form, the Blackdom Townsite Company was

¹⁶ Frank Boyer to Leay, Gill, and Morrow, Blackdom Morgue File, HSSNM.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, this is the only archived example of the Blackdom Townsite Company stationery. With such a limited sample, it is difficult to discern the typical audience for such formal communications.

decidedly utopian, optimistic about the prospect for massive population growth, and reliant on promotional language in hopes of attracting colonists to create capital for additional expansion and profit potential.

The twin institutions of schools and churches listed in the Articles of Incorporation were proposed as bulwarks of social uplift for the town's future residents. Attempts at ensuring racial insulation and solidarity, including provisions, "debarring anyone but colored settlers," likewise played into the widespread theme of the black town as a utopian refuge, removed from racial stigmas, in which moral and intellectual well-being would be valued and nurtured. One southern newspaper published an announcement declaring, "We trust that Blackdom will develop into a large and populous city. None but Southern negroes are to be invited to settle in the town, and there are plenty of them available for the purpose."¹⁸

After the discovery of artesian irrigation in Chaves County around 1890, the region experienced a rapid increase in population.¹⁹ Although the majority of these newcomers were white Euro-Americans, the promise of agricultural success became a potent aspect of Blackdom's ongoing advertising campaigns. In this way, Blackdom was attached to the population booms fueled by natural resources—namely, the combination of arable land and water for irrigation—available in vast quantities throughout the Pecos Valley.²⁰ Developments in transportation, particularly the arrival of the railroad to Roswell in 1894, provided the means through which the population of the lower Pecos Valley ballooned. The

¹⁸ "Colony for Southern Negroes," *The Marion (SC) Star*, September 16, 1903.

¹⁹ Elvis E. Fleming and Minor S. Huffman, eds., *Roundup on the Pecos* (Roswell, NM: Chaves County Historical Society, 1978), 16-19.

²⁰ The "shifting landscapes" of the Pecos Valley are discussed at length in chapter 3, "For Want of Water."

first train of the Pecos Valley and Northeastern Railroad Company (which was later purchased by the Santa Fe Railroad) reached Roswell on October 6, 1894. By 1899, Roswell was connected to the railroad hubs of El Paso, Amarillo, and Santa Fe.²¹

In its initial announcements, the Blackdom Townsite Company explicitly described the means by which the corporation was intended to become a profitable enterprise. The first paragraph indicated, “The amount of capital stock of this corporation shall be ten thousand dollars, which shall be divided into five thousand shares of the par value of two dollars each.”²² This was little more than wishful thinking on the part of the “board of directors,” since the stock was virtually worthless without a deep pool of both settlers and investors. In fact, the basic infrastructure of the town, including “lots, streets, alleys, parks, and public grounds,” was never developed, which further hampered the settlement’s ability to attract governmental services and additional business ventures through the years.²³

This impressive figure was intended to be significant enough that potential investors would take notice, but simultaneously conservative so as to avoid arousing concerns of over-speculation or fraud. Although there is no evidence that the announced sum of \$10,000 was ever collected, or that even a single share was sold, the inclusion of the stock quota and share price linked Blackdom with numerous promotional and profit-based experiments in Kansas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, and California.²⁴ By incorporating the Blackdom Townsite

²¹ “First Train Came to Roswell Oct. 6, 1894,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, February 15, 1922.

²² “Certificate: Articles of Incorporation of Blackdom Townsite Company (No. 3519),” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, September 14, 1903.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For detailed case studies of black settlements from these four states, see Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit*.

Company, its founders ambitiously envisioned not only a community that sheltered residents from the realities of Jim Crow society, but also a business venture that would attract investors and eventually produce profits.

As several scholars have discussed, advertising strategies and capitalism were invariably conjoined during the proliferation of black communities in the West. Crockett explains, “Black-town newspaper editors, promoters, and their agents employed the tactics common to most town propagandists in the American West and South to entice settlers. Boosters candidly admitted that words were inadequate to describe fully the natural advantages of each community and its hinterland. Most tried, however.”²⁵

In the immediate aftermath of the Blackdom Townsite Company’s incorporation, press releases were sent to publications across the country. These announcements were essentially reductions or summaries of the Articles of Incorporation. With little variation, newspapers from at least seven states and one territory reported: “The Blackdom Townsite company was incorporated with a capital stock of \$10,000. The purpose is to establish a colony of negroes from the southern states in Chaves county; the name of the town is to be Blackdom.”²⁶ This truncated statement was dispersed to newspapers in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Texas, South Carolina, Michigan, and of course, throughout New Mexico Territory.²⁷ Despite the emphasis on “southern negroes” as the targeted population of the

²⁵ Crockett, *Black Towns*, 41; See also: Hill, “All Negro Communities of Oklahoma,” 266-67; Painter, *Exodusters*, 156-59; and Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit*, 2-4.

²⁶ “To Establish Negro Colony,” *Defiance (OH) Crescent News*, September 10, 1903.

²⁷ In addition to those quoted in the above paragraphs, similar announcements appeared in the following publications throughout September of 1903: *East Liverpool (OH) Evening News Review*; *Kokomo (IN) Daily Tribune*; *Logansport (IN) Pharos Tribune*; *Delphos (OH) Daily Herald*; *Connersville (IN) Evening News*; *Washington (IN) Herald*; *Massillon (OH) Evening Independent*; *Decatur (IN) Daily Democrat*; *Washington (IN) Gazette*; *Bryan (TX) Morning Eagle*; *Sterling (IL) Gazette*; *New Albany (IN) Weekly Tribune*;

proposed settlement, the majority of this early advertising was focused on midwestern states. It is possible that the founders understood the prohibitive amount of personal capital that transportation and homesteading would require, and hoped to attract what they assumed would be a better-provisioned and possibly wealthier audience from that region, as opposed to the more destitute peoples—especially blacks—of the southern states. Or, perhaps the scarcity of black newspapers and more open-minded publications in the South simply prevented the announcement from reaching print there.

In his influential study on the origins of nationalism, Benedict Anderson notes the role of newspapers in the formation of “imagined communities.” The proliferation of newspapers across the twentieth-century United States connected people across time and space. Thus, black populations separated by the vast distance between Marion, South Carolina and Marshall, Michigan could simultaneously read and imagine the existence of a proposed black settlement in rural New Mexico Territory. Through the modern developments of “mass-produced commodities,” the “ceremonies” of daily newspapers and “print capitalism . . . made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.”²⁸ For Anderson, these “imagined communities” were housed within the nation-state, but Blackdom—despite the evocations of black dominion its name evoked—was not associated with contemporary campaigns for a separate nation of black people or repatriation to Africa.

Marion (IN) Register; Bloomfield (IN) News; Wyoming (IN) Post Herald; Knox Starke County (IN) Democrat; Nashua (IA) Reporter; Brimfield (IL) News; Elkhart (IN) Weekly Truth; Middlebury (IN) Independent; Silver Lake (IN) Record; Marshall (MI) Expounder; Jasper (IN) Herald; Parnell (IA) County Advertiser; Georgetown (SC) Times; Flora (IN) Hoosier Democrat; Artesia (NM) Advocate; and Albuquerque (NM) Morning Journal.

²⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 34-36.

Andrés Reséndez has used Anderson's conceptualization of shared national identity to analyze the print and literary cultures used by non-national ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands before they were incorporated into nations via modern systems of print capitalism.²⁹ Instead of defining themselves as members of looming nation-states, whether the United States, Mexico, or the short-lived Texas Republic, Reséndez claims, "alternative literary cultures" allowed these groups to construct "widely different notions of collective self."³⁰ Blackdom occupied a unique position between these two approaches. The community's founders and promoters saw themselves as a distinct racial population, but were also comfortable as modern citizens of the United States and the Territory of New Mexico—especially when their governments offered a path to land ownership through the Homestead Act.

Nearly a decade after the initial promotional newspaper campaign, a lengthy advertisement appeared in the *Chicago Defender*. The author, Lucy Henderson, whose family occupied a homestead on the periphery of Blackdom near the village of Lake Arthur,³¹ touted the availability of land and opportunity for black people in southeastern New Mexico:

There is plenty of good farm land which the government is willing to give you for a very small entrance fee and three years' residence . . . I have nothing to gain financially by getting settlers here, for where I am the land belongs to the government and is free under the stipulations I have named . . . I feel that I owe it to my people to tell them of this free land . . . Your future is in your own hands . . . Some twenty families compose the colony of Blackdom . . . Surrounding Blackdom are many

²⁹ Andrés Reséndez, "An Expedition and Its Many Tales," in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, ed. Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, 121-149 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 142-43.

³¹ 1910 U.S. Census, New Mexico, Chaves County, Lake Arthur, District 27, population schedule, p. 140, dwelling nos. 136-37, family nos. 138-39, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed March 7, 2018, <http://ancestry.com>.

beautiful farms owned exclusively by members of the race . . . [so] anyone coming to Blackdom and deciding to throw in their lot with us will never have cause to regret it.³²

Newspapers, along with expanding communication and transportation networks, allowed black town experiments of all sorts—especially the Blackdom venture—to reach distant audiences while they created promising visions of racial utopia, market demand, and economic prosperity.

Blackdom was transformed from “imagined community” to physical reality by the homesteading efforts of black settlers. Of the original thirteen who signed the founding documents, only a few ever attempted to homestead in the vicinity of Blackdom. Distance from the area’s established towns, reliance on wage work, and lack of capital necessary to make improvements as required under the 1862 Homestead Act—all acted as barriers to would-be homesteaders. Despite these challenging circumstances, several individuals managed to stake claims and successfully attain land patents during Blackdom’s early years.³³

Among this initial wave of expectant settlers were Mack Taylor and Isaac Jones—the latter, vice president of the Blackdom Townsite Company. Although not sitting on the Board of Directors, Taylor was the first person associated with Blackdom to legally occupy land in the area. He filed his homestead proof on September 8, 1902, a full twelve months before the

³² Lucy Henderson, “Free Land for the Race in [New] Mexico,” *Chicago Defender*, December 21, 1912.

³³ There were over twenty individuals who filed applications for homesteads in the Blackdom area between 1900 and 1930. For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to discuss only a handful. For an exhaustive account of Blackdom land ownership and use, see Timothy Eugene Nelson, “The Significance of the Afro-Frontier in American History: Blackdom, Barratry, and Bawdyhouses in the Borderlands” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, El Paso, 2015).

company was officially incorporated.³⁴ One year later, Frank Boyer and Daniel Keys, both officers of the company, submitted affidavits in support of Taylor's claim.³⁵ After establishing residence around February 6, 1903, Taylor built a "1 room box house," with a "board roof, floor, 1 door, and 1 window." The structure was valued at "not less than \$100." His property of 160 acres was described as primarily "prairie grazing land," with "25 acres fenced," and he reported to have "cultivated five acres [of] raised crops" in his first season.³⁶

On April 4, 1903, just two months after Taylor built his home in Blackdom, Isaac Jones filed a homestead claim nearby. Over the course of the next two years, Jones added various improvements: "a box house, 12 by 20 feet, shingle roof, floor, cellar, 2 doors, 2 windows, barn, well, outbuildings, corral, and entire tract fenced. Total value \$1000." Despite his agricultural efforts, the cultivation of six acres failed to provide sufficient income, and he was often "absent for a week at a time . . . earning money to support himself and family." Finally, on February 23, 1905, with John Montgomery and Charles Childress (from the Board of Directors) as witnesses, Jones filed his final homestead proof.³⁷

³⁴ Mack T. Taylor, Homestead Application No. 2867, Roswell Land Office, *ibid.*; Mack T. Taylor, Homestead Proof—Testimony of Claimant, Application No. 2867, November 17, 1903, Roswell Land Office, *ibid.*

³⁵ Frank Boyer, Homestead Proof—Testimony of Witness, Application No. 2867, November 17, 1903, Roswell Land Office, HSSNM: Blackdom Homestead Papers, Box 41, A/C 971024; Daniel Keyes, Homestead Proof—Testimony of Witness, Application No. 2867, November 17, 1903, Roswell Land Office, HSSNM: Blackdom Homestead Papers, Box 41, A/C 971024.

³⁶ Mack T. Taylor, Homestead Proof—Testimony of Claimant, Application No. 2867, November 17, 1903, Roswell Land Office, A/C 971024, Blackdom Homestead Papers, HSSNM.

³⁷ John Montgomery, Homestead Proof—Testimony of Witness, Application No. 3963, February 23, 1905, Roswell Land Office, HSSNM: A/C 971024, Box 41, Blackdom Homestead Papers, HSSNM; Charles Childress, Homestead Proof—Testimony of Witness, Application No. 3963, February 23, 1905, Roswell Land Office, *ibid.*; Isaac W. Jones, Homestead Proof—Testimony of Claimant, Application No. 3963, February 23, 1905, Roswell Land Office, *ibid.*

Both men were connected to Blackdom: Taylor, through the men who served as witnesses for his homestead claim; and Jones, through witnesses and his position as vice-president of the Blackdom Townsite Company. By attempting to cultivate the land, they engaged one aspect of Blackdom's mission, improving the lives of black settlers through land ownership and self-sufficiency, even if their endeavors were only temporary.

Beyond this basic tenet of economic uplift, however, Taylor and Jones became involved with a scandal that hampered Blackdom's early development and tied the Blackdom Townsite Company to disreputable promotional schemes often associated with settlement ventures in the West. This "Tallmadge Affair," as it came to be known, was a land-fraud case similar to countless others that proliferated wherever western lands were distributed, bought, and sold. Monopolizing business factions—particularly railroad companies and extractive industries—bought up large tracts of real estate at depressed rates after settlers failed to "prove up" their homesteads in the allotted period of time. Purchasing land in such a fashion was not illegal, but corporations often colluded with individuals to stake fraudulent claims with resale as the primary intention, the practice directly violating the premises of the Homestead Act. The difficulty of proving intent in a courtroom, combined with the incompetence and corruption that permeated the Department of the Interior, permitted many such rackets to proceed with relative impunity.³⁸

Between 1904 and 1905, Taylor and Jones each sold their holdings to subsidiary representatives of the Tallmadge Southwestern Lands Immigration Company, which acquired

³⁸ For further examples of land schemes, corruption, and fraud in the West, see Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 137-54; and for specific instances of land fraud and graft in the New Mexico Territory, see George W. Julian, "Land-Stealing in New Mexico," *The North American Review* 145, no. 368 (1887): 17-31.

large tracts of land in the Pecos Valley through scrip purchases and then advertised and sold to incoming settlers. The Tallmadge Company also owned an interest in the Santa Fe Railroad, transportation used to import settlers. With both railroad and land businesses booming at the turn of the twentieth century, the Tallmadge Company needed more land than they could acquire through legal means. In 1903, brothers Chester L., D. R., Edwin R., and Benjamin H. Tallmadge hatched a scheme to increase their land holdings. Rather than wait for public lands to become available, the Tallmadge Company began to hire “dummy entrymen” to file claims and immediately sell out to the company in return for a paltry sum of twenty-five dollars. When these underhanded methods came to light, the Tallmadge brothers soon became embroiled in a sensational land-fraud investigation.³⁹

Although the charges against the Tallmadge corporation were quickly dismissed, the reputation of the Blackdom Townsite Company was tarnished by the scandal. This negative association hindered Blackdom’s early development, as new land policies were put into action to prevent further fraudulent schemes. There is no evidence directly linking Mack Taylor and Isaac Jones to the Tallmadge brothers, and they were not named in the investigation or legal proceedings. However, both men soon left Chaves County, possibly out of concern over impending legal consequences related to perjury in their homestead affidavits. Neither appeared in the public records of New Mexico after 1905. It is unclear whether Frank Boyer, Daniel Keys, Charles Childress, or the other witnesses were aware of these rather devious schemes. Nevertheless, because of their association with the land claims processes of both Mack Taylor and Isaac Jones, the first stage of Blackdom settlement

³⁹ George B. Anderson, *History of New Mexico: Its Resources and People* (Los Angeles: Pacific States Publishing Company, 1907), 283-84; “Prosecutions in New Mexico” *Albuquerque (NM) Morning Journal*, December 11, 1906.

concluded with a controversy that inhibited the expansion of the Blackdom Townsite Company and echoed prior black town experiments in which unscrupulous promotional activities and profit-seeking held sway.⁴⁰

After this turbulent beginning, the homesteading efforts resumed and gradually increased Blackdom's population toward the peak years of 1915-1916. During this period, Clinton Ragsdale became the most successful land owner in Blackdom. He filed his original claim December 26, 1907. He augmented his homestead in 1916, and by the time he received the patent in 1920, he owned 280 acres of "prairie land, agricultural and grazing in character," with a "Five room house and good well on original entry, windmill and tank on the Add'l entry. All of each entry fenced with three wires except 40 acres" and estimated at \$1,400.⁴¹ Duran Herron and William Proffitt served as witnesses on Ragsdale's behalf.⁴² Few Blackdom homesteaders reached the level of sustained prosperity that Clinton Ragsdale managed to acquire. He and his wife, Mollie, appear to be the only farmers associated with Blackdom who maintained residence on their homesteads at the time the 1930 census.⁴³

⁴⁰ Regge N. Wiseman, "Precipitation, Dry-Land Farming, and Blackdom," in *Glimpses of Late Frontier Life in New Mexico's Southern Pecos Valley: Archaeology and History at Blackdom and Seven Rivers* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico, Office of Archaeology Studies, 2000), 29-31. For a deeper discussion of the "Tallmadge Affair" and its impact on the Blackdom experiment, see Nelson, "Significance of the Afro-Frontier," 57-65.

⁴¹ Clinton Ragsdale, Homestead Entry Final Proof—Testimony of Claimant, Application No. 033948, February 23, 1920, Roswell Land Office, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

⁴² Duran Y. Herron, Homestead Entry Final Proof—Testimony of Witness, Application No. 033948, February 23, 1920, Roswell Land Office, *ibid.*; William D. Proffitt, Homestead Entry Final Proof—Testimony of Witness, Application No. 033948, February 23, 1920, Roswell Land Office, *ibid.*

⁴³ 1930 U.S. census, Chaves County, New Mexico, Precinct 4, District 14, population schedule, p. 173, dwelling 154, family 157, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed March 2, 2018. <https://ancestry.com>.



Fig. 1.1 William Proffitt's residence on his Blackdom homestead, circa 1908. Courtesy of the Historical Society for Southeast New Mexico, Roswell NM.

With this influx of homesteaders and increasing population after 1907, Blackdom soon found itself in need of institutions to fulfill aspects the original mission statement set forth in the Articles of Incorporation for the Blackdom Townsite Company. Chief among these urgent social obligations were the cornerstones of most communities on the western frontier: church and school. In 1909, Blackdom residents pooled their funds toward erecting a church building. After the structure was completed, the Second Baptist Church of Roswell helped establish Sunday school classes, which were then presided over by "Rev. W.D. Proffit, pastor." The article also listed Frank Boyer as the church's treasurer and concluded hopefully, "We wish to see great results among the people of the Blackdom settlement."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ "Second Baptists Organize Sunday School," *Roswell Daily Record*, August 16, 1909.



Fig. 1.2 Sunday school class at Blackdom Baptist Church, circa 1909. Courtesy of the Historical Society for Southeast New Mexico, Roswell, NM.

The original church building was used primarily as a place of worship, but also served as the Blackdom schoolhouse. In 1910, a notice placed in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, touted the “commodious school house” and requested “assistance in arranging for the curriculum and a teacher.”⁴⁵ After an unsuccessful attempt to hire an instructor from the Booker T. Washington Institute, the residents of Blackdom “were forced to accept the best they could find locally.”⁴⁶ Both James Eubank and Loney K. Wagoner served as teachers in the Blackdom school.⁴⁷ In 1926, the school was still in operation—although greatly diminished because of Blackdom’s dwindling population at that point. The register of

⁴⁵ “Exclusive Negro Settlement,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, October 13, 1910.

⁴⁶ Effie Bradley Mehlhop, “Blackdom,” in *As We Remembered It* by Dexter Old Timers (Roswell: Hall-Poorbaugh Press, 1970), 67-68.

⁴⁷ Lillian Collins Westfield, interview with Elvis Fleming, March 18, 1975, pp. 3-6, Blackdom Morgue File, HSSNM.

teachers in Chaves County listed Miss Cora Vandebont and L.K. Wagoner as the teachers at the “Blackdom Colored School.”⁴⁸

Eventually, the Blackdom congregation outgrew the small church, and in 1915, a new fundraising campaign was initiated. The *Artesia Pecos Valley News* reported: “A number of negroes from the Blackdom settlement up the valley came to Artesia . . . and put on a very creditable performance. . . . The receipts went to the building fund of the Blackdom Church.”⁴⁹ A few weeks later, the same publication announced, “On Sunday the village of Blackdom consisting entirely of colored people will hold a dedication service for a new Baptist Church which they have just completed at a cost of \$1000.”⁵⁰ In addition to his role as a teacher at the Blackdom school, James Eubank operated a small general store and served as the first postmaster at the Blackdom post office. After Eubank stepped down from the position, he was replaced by George Malone. The last person to hold the title was Bessie Malone, Blackdom’s only female postmaster. Erected in 1912, the post office connected Blackdom to the outside world, serving both as a conduit for communication and material goods.⁵¹ The Blackdom Cash Book contains the accounts that Blackdom settlers used to order specialty goods and supplies from the commercial hub of Albuquerque or to send and receive money orders. Although these accounts include neither names nor descriptions of

⁴⁸ “Chaves County Teachers Are Ready to Start,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, September 2, 1926.

⁴⁹ “Baptist Church Notes,” *Artesia (NM) Pecos Valley News*, November 11, 1915.

⁵⁰ “Notice,” *Artesia (NM) Pecos Valley News*, December 13, 1915.

⁵¹ Local historian Elvis Fleming maintains that Blackdom never possessed a proper post office. Instead, he has proposed that James Eubank travelled to the nearby village of Vocant, which did keep a post office, and transported the mail back to his store, where he distributed it to Blackdom residents. Given the recently discovered existence of the Blackdom Cash Book and indications from local newspapers at the time, it would appear that such an institution did exist for the majority of the town’s most prosperous years. See Fleming and Huffman, *Roundup on the Pecos*, 175.

requisitioned items, the neatly tabulated columns indicate the ways that money flowed through Blackdom. After nearly seven years of operation, the Blackdom post office closed in 1919.⁵²

Frank and Ella Boyer filed the Blackdom Townsite Plat on May 28, 1920.⁵³ The townsite was registered on a forty-acre rectangle of land and divided into 166 lots, thirty-five feet in width and one hundred feet in length. The lots surrounded a public square and park, with wide streets named conspicuously for Abraham Lincoln, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and Nat Turner.⁵⁴

After the scandalous early years of the Blackdom Townsite Company, homesteading efforts and the construction of vital institutions transformed Blackdom from “imagined community” into physical place. The filing of the Townsite Plat represented yet another shift in Blackdom’s history, this time returning the community to its original state of nebulous reverie. Frank and Ella Boyer laid out the plans for their idealized townsite, but their aspirations went unrealized. No one ever settled there, although several descendants of Blackdom homesteaders still own plots in the townsite section.

⁵² “Blackdom Cash Book,” April 1, 1913, National Postal Museum, Washington, D.C.; Lillian Collins Westfield, interview with Elvis Fleming, March 18, 1975, pp. 3-4, Blackdom Morgue File, HSSNM; “Colored Postmaster at Blackdom Will Retain Position,” *Albuquerque (NM) Morning Journal*, January 26, 1914; Leah Binkovitz, “Welcome to Blackdom, the Ghost Town That Was New Mexico’s First Black Settlement,” *Smithsonian Magazine Online*, February 4, 2013. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/welcome-to-blackdom-the-ghost-town-that-was-new-mexicos-first-black-settlement-10750177/>.

⁵³ Blackdom Townsite Plat, May 28, 1920, Chaves County Clerk’s Office, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection.

⁵⁴ Ibid.



Fig. 1.3 Blackdom Townsite Plat, May 28, 1920, Chaves County Clerk's Office, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection.

The community was intended to produce both financial stability and insulation from racial antagonism, yet it yielded little profit and suffered racialized disparagement from neighboring towns. Local responses to Blackdom fluctuated between hostility, enthusiasm,

and indifference. The following excerpt from the *Roswell Daily Record* articulated an unusually even-handed disposition toward the emerging venture:

There is a future town of Blackdom which is being extensively advertised and the proposal is to build it somewhere in the Pecos Valley. If built, all the inhabitants of this proposed town will have to be imported as at present there are not enough negroes in the Valley even to make a start. The town at present merely exists on paper. . . . it shows that the rich resources of the Pecos Valley are attracting the attention of all people regardless of race, color, politics, or previous condition of servitude.⁵⁵

As the following chapter will demonstrate, despite the rather begrudging tone of the *Daily Record*, few published opinions on the subject attained even this underwhelming degree of open-mindedness throughout the duration of the Blackdom experiment.

⁵⁵ "The Roswell Negro," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, October 8, 1903.

II

REVISITING RACE

Visions of wealth and profit served as a powerful lure, enticing settlers to the sun-scorched prairies of southeastern New Mexico. Whether by word of mouth or through the distance-defying systems of print capitalism, Blackdom's founders created the image of an agrarian utopia that intertwined cooperation, social uplift, and economic prosperity for the welfare of African-American people. Blackdom also promised some measure of refuge from the rancor that spurred Exodusters out of the South and often materialized yet again when they reached their destinations. This acrimony conjured a familiar aura of racial difference that haunted African-Americans' repeated attempts to build new homes and lives. Blackdom was imagined as a place where racial harmony could be achieved through isolation and self-sufficiency, but hostility and intolerance routinely permeated the interactions between the community and neighboring populations.

On December 14, 1912, a prominent advertisement in the *Indianapolis Freeman* declared: "Wanted! 500 Negro families (farmers preferred) to settle on Free Government Land in Chaves County, New Mexico. Fertile [sic] soil, ideal climate. No 'Jim Crow' laws. For information write Jas. Harold Coleman. Blackdom, New Mexico."¹ This outpouring of optimism echoed the hyperbolic character of similar Exoduster projects and exemplified the promotional efforts intended to attract settlers to Blackdom.

The *Freeman* advertisement's claim regarding the absence of Jim Crow statutes neatly sidestepped the reality of the racial landscape that confronted black immigrants in New Mexico. A comparable letter published in the *Chicago Defender* pronounced that in

¹ "Wanted!" *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 14, 1912.

Blackdom, “There is no ‘Jim Crowism’ . . . Here the black man has an equal chance with the white man.”² Once again, the hopeful tone of the printed word paled in comparison to the overarching racial climate surrounding Blackdom. Although more commonly enforced through social convention than legal ordinances, segregation remained prevalent in southeastern New Mexico until the middle of the twentieth century. Contemporaneous newspaper articles and reflective oral histories highlight instances of racial tension surrounding the Blackdom community at different moments in its brief existence. Racial animosity appears to have peaked soon after the town’s establishment, then stabilized until the early 1920s, when the nationwide reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan took root in Roswell. African American pioneers in New Mexico largely avoided the waves of violence, intimidation, and lynching that surged across the southern United States in the early decades of the twentieth century, but Blackdom was seldom wholly insulated from discrimination and racial conflict, despite the isolationist and utopian aspirations professed in promotional literature and testimonials.

In his 2002 presidential address to the Western History Association, Elliott West argued that, following the abolition of slavery, mass migrations of African Americans out of the South were a watershed moment for a nation struggling to consolidate both its national territory and racial identity:

In the years after the Civil War, all America was a kind of borderland where racial edges and meanings were shift and blurred . . . The war dismantled the nation’s most elaborate racial institution and brought western questions to a boil. Never had

² Lucy H. Henderson, “Free Land for the Race in Mexico,” *Chicago Defender*, December 21, 1912. Note the confusion of Mexico and New Mexico in the article’s headline. This mistake is most likely attributed to the editor’s familiarity with concurrent attempts to establish black colonies south of the border in Mexico. See Karl Jacoby, *The Strange Career of William Ellis: The Texas Slave Who Became a Mexican Millionaire* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016).

America's sense been so uncertain of how its racial parts fit together, or even what those parts were. Small wonder, then, that many Americans looked hard for unconfused racial boundaries . . .³

The sudden influx of African Americans to the West introduced a black-white racial binary that had previously been complicated by pervasive legacies of intermixing and shared kinship between Indians and Hispanos.⁴ The upheaval of the Civil War and Reconstruction triggered significant demographic friction as the Exoduster movement generated newfound mobility for a formerly sedentary black population. Along with other ethnic and religious groups, African Americans found themselves simultaneously pulled toward and pushed into the West. Property ownership, civil rights, and economic opportunity beckoned from this promised land. But the forces that impelled African Americans out of the South were equally powerful. The Compromise of 1877 effectively ended federal Reconstruction in the South, handing the reins of political dominion to Democratic "Redeemers" who sought to roll back the protections and rights won on the battlefield and with the ballot. Black Codes and vigilante terrorism ensured that freedmen remained relegated to the lowest rungs of the social ladder. With few opportunities to acquire either property or education, they were still slaves in all but name.⁵

Upon arrival in the West, Exodusters were confronted by a somewhat confusing racial landscape, which initially struggled to incorporate their blackness. After the onset of

³ Elliott West, "Reconstructing Race" *Western Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 2003): 15.

⁴ For a more nuanced discussion of the evolving racial landscape of New Mexico at the close of the territorial period, see Pablo Mitchell, *Coyote Nation: Sexuality, Race, and Conquest in Modernizing New Mexico, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵ See W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, (1935; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1998); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014); Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998).

the U.S.-Mexican War in 1846, the rapidly multiplying numbers of Euro-Americans in the western territories annexed from Mexico set the stage for the bifurcation that would dominate the United States' outlook on race relations through the middle of the twentieth century.⁶ Blackdom's history serves as a productive illustration of the complexities of racial attitudes and interaction as the southwest borderlands were incorporated into the rapidly expanding and modernizing American nation. During its abbreviated existence, the Blackdom Townsite Company pledged that the community would strive for utopian levels of cooperation beyond the reach of Jim Crow animus. Despite such assurances of racial insulation, published accounts, residents' memories, and the specter of the resurgent Ku Klux Klan provide glimpses into the racial tensions that seeped into or shadowed daily life in Blackdom and neighboring towns.

The most startling remnants from this period can be found in the archives of the *Artesia Advocate*. On September 19, 1903, the *Advocate* announced that Blackdom had filed its Articles of Incorporation and warned against ignoring the implications of the impending settlement. In a sober tone, the paper indicated the seriousness of the situation: "Those citizens of the valley who supposed the idea of an exclusive Negro town in Chaves County was a huge joke are badly mistaken." The notice closed with a threatening pronouncement: "If the colonists work hard, behave themselves and do exactly what their white neighbors want them to do, all will be well. Otherwise, otherwise." In no uncertain terms, the *Advocate* declared the superior position of the area's white citizens and threatened dire consequences should the newcomers exceed the parameters of their inferior racial station.⁷

⁶ Mitchell, *Coyote Nation*, 1-25.

⁷ "Notice," *Artesia (NM) Advocate*, September 19, 1903.

Two weeks later, the *Advocate* published an editorial diatribe authored by Mr. W.R. Cummins, “a well-known citizen of Roswell.” The piece bore the headline “A White Man’s Country,” in large, bold print, and extended the entire length of the front page.⁸ Cummins emphatically declared:

This is a white man’s government, and ever since Roswell’s been on the map, white people have paid the taxes and managed the town. It is true that . . . there has [*sic*] been one or two good old-fashioned negroes here, and they have had the respect and confidence of all the people. But now Roswell is threatened with an overflow of worthless negroes. . .⁹

Cummins’s statements conjured two racist stereotypes of African Americans that were all too familiar in the Jim Crow era. For him, black people were either lazy, ungrateful social parasites, or “good old-fashioned negroes,” who understood and accepted their place in the white man’s racial hierarchy. His stereotypes and claims were ignored or dismissed the list of community intentions set forth in Blackdom’s Articles of Incorporation. Section 6 of the company charter specifically dictated that the Blackdom Corporation “maintain a colony of negroes by means of the cultivation of crops . . . and the general improvement of the inhabitants of such colony.”¹⁰ From its inception, the community sustained a steadfast commitment to the self-sufficiency championed by Jeffersonian democracy. In the face of constant economic and environmental hardship, Blackdom residents remained industrious, resourceful, and resilient.

⁸ W.R. Cummins, “A White Man’s Country,” *Artesia (NM) Advocate*, October 3, 1903.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Certificate: Articles of Incorporation of Blackdom Townsite Company (No. 3519),” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, September 14, 1903.

The *Advocate* editorial continued: “The people have been wondering what to do to protect our families and homes from the encroachments of these worthless blacks. Today they are threatening to invade our public schools, they are saucy and impudent in the streets and in the stores and have seen for some time that we are up against a tough proposition [sic].”¹¹ Once again invoking the supposed inferiority of African Americans, Cummins accused Blackdom residents of “invading” public institutions and transgressing the appropriate bounds of deferential racial etiquette. Blackdom’s charter, however, guaranteed provisions for “school houses, colleges, churches, and . . . institutions for the improvement and upbuilding [sic] of the moral and mental condition of the colony.” These ideals indicated the community’s emphasis on principled values.¹² Blackdom’s general store, school house, and Baptist church represent the town’s dedication to social, economic, and religious development. When the United States entered the Great War in April of 1917, church members from Blackdom made a small but meaningful contribution to the war effort. The *Roswell Daily Record* published two articles commending the Red Cross unit of Blackdom on its “fine work.” “The colored women of Blackdom banded themselves together” to knit scrub cloths for the Red Cross hospitals where sick and injured soldiers convalesced.¹³ Three weeks later, the *Daily Record* once again praised the women for “doing a beautiful work of service in their humble way for God and humanity.”¹⁴ Cummins may have accused his black

¹¹ W.R. Cummins, “A White Man’s Country,” *Artesia (NM) Advocate* (Artesia, NM), October 3, 1903.

¹² “Certificate: Articles of Incorporation of Blackdom Townsite Company (No. 3519),” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, September 14, 1903.

¹³ “Red Cross Scrub Cloths,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, August 9, 1917.

¹⁴ “Red Cross Calls You!” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, August 31, 1917.

neighbors of indolence, but others recognized Blackdom settlers' modest acts of service to their community and nation.

Cummins concluded his remarks with a sarcasm-laden attack on local businesses that openly offered their services to blacks. "Isn't this refreshing to the people who regard a negro as a 'nigger' and demand that he keep his place at the foot of the table instead of at the head? . . . I claim that Booker Washington is just as good as any negro, but when it comes to making any negro as good as a respectable white, I draw the line."¹⁵ Not all white community members espoused such racist vitriol, but its unabashed presence in a public forum nevertheless revealed the extent to which these sentiments were viewed as defensible, if not wholly popular.

A mere five days later, the *Daily Record* published a column entitled "The Roswell Negro."¹⁶ The article described an unpleasant encounter suffered by W.F. Pafford. While attending a church festival, Pafford "ran up against a sable son of Africa eating with the whites. This was more than Mr. Pafford could stand and he left. . ." At first glance, this announcement seems little more than a minor complaint about racial mixing in public venues. The article continued, however, to elaborate, however, on the "gross injustice" of Pafford's comments, which were "going the rounds of the press." The paper's outrage was not directed at his segregationist views, but rather at what his assertions implied about the city itself:

In the first place there are but very few negroes in Roswell, and those who are here keep their places. There is just as little so called "negro equality" in Roswell as you can find in any town of the south. Mr. Pafford in the above incident may have

¹⁵ W.R. Cummins, "A White Man's Country," *Artesia (NM) Advocate*, October 3, 1903.

¹⁶ "The Roswell Negro," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, October 8, 1903.

mistaken some weary Caucasian fair visitor covered with Pecos Valley Dust for a son of Ham. . . . At any rate there is no mixing of races here.¹⁷

The column scolded Pafford for suggesting that Roswell's population was tainted by a significant black presence and then proceeded to emphasize the inferior racial and social status of the few African Americans who made Roswell and the surrounding area their home. In an attempt at levity, the *Daily Record* alluded to the interpretation of the biblical "Curse of Ham," which has been used by various groups to justify the oppression and enslavement of dark-skinned peoples around the world.¹⁸ By suggesting that Mr. Pafford had simply been deceived, the column sought to explain away the unsettling racial nature of the confrontation. Replacing the perceived menace of blackness with the dusty visage of a fellow "Caucasian" rendered Pafford's protest moot and rhetorically erased the threat of interracial contact.

Half a century later, this earlier era of widespread segregation still reverberated through published accounts. In 1965, the *Albuquerque Journal* printed a short column with headlines and stories from 1915, titled "Fifty Years Ago." The first paragraph recounted an unusual event that had occurred that year in Artesia. A "Negro preacher" from Blackdom visited Artesia to "solicit funds for a new church." After receiving a "liberal response to his pleas for donations," the parson "went home well pleased." Despite the reportedly warm welcome, the closing sentences of the column make clear that this was an infrequent circumstance: "Artesia is the only town of any size in New Mexico where the colored race is absolutely barred out."¹⁹ Blackness may have been a relatively new addition to the racial

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ "Fifty Years Ago," *Albuquerque (NM) Journal*, February 14, 1965.

milieu of New Mexico, but representatives of the “colored race” quickly discovered sentiments that echoed their treatment in the South.

Oral histories and remembered experiences offer varying individual perspectives on race relations in Roswell and Blackdom. Francis Boyer’s son, Roosevelt Boyer Sr. spent much of his childhood in Blackdom until the family moved to Vado, New Mexico, after the town’s collapse. In a 1996 interview with historian Maisha Baton, Boyer responded to a question about the racial climate and segregationist policies in the neighboring communities:

At first whites didn’t mind. They were all from the North and they soon all moved out and left the place to the Southerners. They didn’t like nobody [*sic*]. They was [*sic*] hard on us as they could be . . . Dad [Francis Boyer] wasn’t used to negroes going to school with the whites so he didn’t fight it. Better for black children to be in their own school.²⁰

These comments reveal Francis Boyer’s relative comfort with segregation. Section 5 of the Blackdom Articles of Incorporation provided for “a system of education among the inhabitants of the town of Blackdom and the surrounding country . . . to improve the health, welfare, and prosperity of such inhabitants.”²¹ As a disciple of Booker T. Washington, Boyer was intimately familiar with the debates surrounding Washington’s controversial 1895 “Atlanta Compromise” speech, in which he proposed that African Americans abandon civil rights agitation and instead pursue educational and economic advancement within the strictures of segregation.²² It would appear that for the Boyers and many of their neighbors in Blackdom, segregation was an acceptable—perhaps even preferred—racial status quo.

²⁰ Maisha Baton and Henry Walt, *A History of Blackdom, N.M., in the Context of the African-American Post-Civil War Colonization Movement*. (Santa Fe: Office of Cultural Affairs, Historic Preservation District, 1996), 7-9.

²¹ “Certificate: Articles of Incorporation of Blackdom Townsite Company (No. 3519),” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, September 14, 1903.

²² See Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* (New York:

In the early decades of the twentieth century, college-educated African Americans like Francis Boyer were probably acquainted with discourses regarding self-imposed segregation. Published in 1899, Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* is emblematic of such literature. Despite being virtually unknown to white readers of the period, in the greater black community Griggs was among the most widely read authors of his time. *Imperium in Imperio*, which translates to “the state within the state,” told the story of a secret, powerful, and prosperous black alliance that concealed itself behind the walls of a black college in Texas. The members of this utopian fraternity grappled with the choice between striving for harmonious co-existence within white society or seeking violent revolution and secession from the United States. Ultimately, the Imperium is betrayed and destroyed, its demise warning readers of the tenuous future of a subjugated race left divided and leaderless. The lessons contained in *Imperium in Imperio* offered both revolutionary rhetoric and the more conciliatory positions of figures such as Booker T. Washington. For either faction—and certainly for the community of Blackdom—segregation could serve as both boon and bane.

A collection of pioneer family histories compiled by the Dexter Historical Society in 1970 contains a rather jarring (and possibly apocryphal) reminiscence of interracial contact with Blackdom residents. H.R. “Dick” Lathrop recalled joining the local white doctor on a late-night excursion to visit a sick woman in Blackdom around 1910. It was winter, and the windblown snow collected in heavy drifts across the plains. When the men arrived at the patient’s home, Lathrop remembered the doctor admonishing the woman’s husband about the lack of firewood in the house.

Oxford University Press, 1975); Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Dr. Stallard was quick to notice this and roared at the man: “Jube, you black rascal, why haven’t you got a better fire in here?”

“Mistah Doctah,” Jube whined, “I’ve been sorta puny lately, and I ain’t got no wood.”

“Then tomorrow morning you hitch up your team and go grub a load of mesquite, and then you get back here and you keep this house warm or I’ll skin you alive. You’re a trifling lazy nigger,” he stormed.

Old Jube said, “Yassuh Doctah, Yassuh,” and was soon back with an armload of wood he had somehow managed to find.²³

This exchange is remarkable not only for its racially charged language, but also because it was memorialized in the pages of a celebratory local-history collection nearly six decades later. Lathrop obviously felt that the story primarily reflected his own selflessness and the generosity of the doctor. Their benevolent intentions aside, his reporting of the incident highlights the manner in which African Americans were viewed by a segment of the area’s white residents. The account suggests that recycled stereotypical characteristics of laziness, poor hygiene and living conditions, illiteracy, and linguistic caricatures informed Lathrop’s perceptions of and interactions with his black neighbors.

Despite the condescending tone of Lathrop’s anecdote, relations between Blackdom community members and their white neighbors remained mostly tranquil throughout the decade from 1910 to 1920. A scene narrated in the *Daily Record* encapsulates this period of apparent racial harmony. Residents from the surrounding area gathered in Roswell to celebrate New Mexico’s impending statehood and “Juneteenth,” which commemorated the anniversary of the emancipation of slaves in Confederate Texas: “On Sunday a baseball game was played between the colored nines of Roswell and of Carlsbad. . . . The locals won

²³ H.R. “Dick” Lathrop, “A ‘Call’ with Dr. Stallard,” in *As We Remembered It* by Dexter Old Timers (Roswell, NM: Hall-Poorbaugh Press, 1970), 212-13. I have been unable to corroborate this account in my research. The reported names of the black homesteaders do not appear in any of the newspaper articles or census records for Chaves County.

by a score of 21 to 2 . . . Tonight [there] will be given a dance, supper, and boxing contest.”²⁴

For a short span of time, fellowship outweighed discord and shared humanity prevailed over racial boundaries.

In 1999, the *Daily Record* published a special profile of Hazel Parker. Born in 1921, Parker experienced the waning years of the Blackdom settlement. Her parents, Caleb and Mary Taylor, arrived from Austin, Texas around 1910, drawn by the promise of land ownership in the then-thriving community of Blackdom. By 1920, the receding water table of the Pecos Valley made farming in Blackdom virtually impossible, and the Taylors were forced to seek employment in nearby towns. Her mother worked as a maid for a white family while her father pursued a wide variety of trades, including mason, carpenter, and butcher. Caleb also worked as a chef in multiple restaurants in both Roswell and Dexter. By 1926, when Hazel was five years old, many of Blackdom’s residents had abandoned the community for better prospects.²⁵

The Taylors clawed out a life in Blackdom until 1929, when they finally left their homestead behind and moved into Roswell. Although environmental distress and employment logistics likely informed the decision to uproot the family once again, the choice was not theirs alone. While Caleb and Mary worked extended hours to provide for their family, Hazel and her younger siblings were often left unattended. The Roswell sheriff, likely out of concern for the unsupervised children, ordered Caleb Taylor to bring his family to Roswell within forty-eight hours. The Taylors reluctantly complied. The actions of the

²⁴ “Negroes Celebrate Emancipation Day,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, June 20, 1910.

²⁵ Julien Gorbach, “Tales of Homesteading: Hazel Parker Lives Life Independently,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, November 8, 1999.

sheriff, whether benevolent or otherwise, reveal the tangible power dynamics between a black family and a white representative of state-sponsored civil authority. On command, without mention of extended legal proceedings, the Taylors were forced to relinquish their relative autonomy in Blackdom and submit to the harsh realities of segregated life in nearby Roswell.²⁶

In their new home, “segregation was complete, not by law, but by social custom.”²⁷ The Taylor family joined several of their former Blackdom neighbors, and moved into a house just beyond the section of the city dubbed “Ragtown.”²⁸ Another African American family operated a ten-bedroom boarding house where black “travelers and newcomers” could find refuge “for weeks at a time while they got settled.”²⁹ Black children attended school three miles away in Roswell’s “red light district,” where “prostitution and violent incidents” were commonplace. Before the segregated school was renamed for George Washington Carver, it had simply been referred to as the “Negro School.” It consisted of “a two-room building” for elementary and junior high students, while high school classes were taught in “a dilapidated shack that had been towed in as an addition.” Parker recalled: “It would not even have been decent for a man and a woman to live in. If you had seen the ragged thing, you would have said that [it] is ridiculous.” Whenever it rained, the buildings flooded and became unusable. Poor facilities were accompanied by worn-out and mismatched books, desks, and other various supplies cast off by Roswell’s white schools. This exposure to the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Carole Larson, “Roswellite Remembers Blackdom,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, May 6, 1984.

²⁸ Julien Gorbach, “Tales of Homesteading: Hazel Parker Lives Life Independently,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, November 8, 1999.

²⁹ Ibid.

ludicrous “separate but equal” mantra of segregationist education policy weighed heavily on Parker. After graduating from George Washington Carver in 1941, she began working as the secretary of the newly formed local NAACP chapter. A decade later in 1952, with a young family of her own, she played an active role in the campaign to desegregate Roswell’s schools.³⁰

Hazel Parker’s experiences highlight the tragic reversals of fortune that faced many Blackdom residents after the failure of their ambitious community. Blackdom families enjoyed a brief period of prosperity and insulation from constant reminders of their subordinate social standing, only to be forced back into Jim Crow society by economic hardship or—in the case of the Parkers—the seemingly arbitrary decision of an imperious officer of the law.

In 2007, Robert Anderson, a Roswell native and admirer of the settlers and descendants of Blackdom, conducted a series of interviews with Helena Wagoner Collins. Like Hazel Parker, Collins was one of the last children to be raised in Blackdom. She also spent the later years of her childhood in Roswell and attended school at George Washington Carver. When the interview eventually turned to the subject of race relations and segregation, Collins was significantly more restrained and circumspect than either Roosevelt Boyer or Hazel Parker. Anderson opened the conversation by recalling instances of racism he had witnessed as a young man. After continually deflecting his queries, Collins hesitantly acknowledged that Roswell did experience its fair share of racist sentiment but quickly

³⁰ Ibid.; “Claims Segregation Still Exists in Carlsbad,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, July 8, 1954; “Negro Parents to File Petition,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, July 9, 1954.

interjected, “Oh, but not like Mississippi.”³¹ In response to a question about how she remembered being treated by the white citizens of Roswell, Collins replied with a resigned ambivalence:

You make the best you can with what you have . . . Not being able to go in and buy something didn’t bother me . . . We weren’t welcome in their eateries . . . I couldn’t sit at the [drugstore] counter. So I accepted it . . . He [her father] always told us if you respect yourself and if someone is mean to you or disrespects you, all you have to do is walk away. Turn and walk away. Not that he always did that.³²

Although the African American experience in New Mexico and, indeed, in many places outside the South may have been a significant improvement over the pervasive racial enmity so common in places “like Mississippi,” racial tension remained a tangible, if sometimes encoded, aspect of daily life.³³

Race relations in the Blackdom community can also be extrapolated from debates surrounding the controversial Ku Klux Klan. Infamous for its visually striking processions in hooded white robes and shadowy vigils illuminated by blazing crosses, the ritualistic order first rose from the ashes of the South in reaction to the perceived injustices of federal Reconstruction. Although disconnected from one another by subtle shifts in ideology and membership demographics, the Ku Klux Klan enjoyed three distinct periods of proliferation and influence. In its initial phase from 1865-71, the Klan added elements of vigilante enforcement to legal ordinances designed to terrorize and disenfranchise the newly freed black population in the southern states. A concerted effort by agencies of federal power

³¹ Helena Wagoner Collins, interview by Robert Anderson, March 18, 2007, transcript, Robert Anderson Personal Collection.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

forced the conspicuous Klan to disband at the apex of Reconstruction. Nevertheless, open hostility toward religious and ethnic minorities remained potent. It was this lingering presence of Klan intimidation and violence that created much of the impetus for the Great Migration out of the South and eventually led to the founding of Blackdom on the distant New Mexico prairie.³⁴ While visions of social uplift and economic progress lured freedmen westward, a burgeoning climate of white supremacy, political oppression, and racial violence propelled black emigration at an unprecedented rate.³⁵

The archives of the *Roswell Daily Record* depict a triangular relationship between the newspaper, the local community, and the nebulous Ku Klux Klan. Throughout the 1920s, the *Daily Record* printed regular Associated Press updates on the Klan's activities, scandals, and outrages from around the country. These brief announcements included election results, legal proceedings, and miscellaneous Klan-related incidents across Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, and fifteen other states from New York to Oregon. During the turbulent summer of 1924, the *Daily Record* offered weekly reports from the political front lines, echoing the national debates surrounding the growing influence of the Klan. Although there are no reports of direct contact or strife between local Klansmen and members of the Blackdom community, the very existence of such an organization highlighted the fraught racial environment that surrounded Blackdom in its later years.

Initially, the *Daily Record's* reporting of the Klan was laced with disapproval, and the paper positioned itself as a staunch opponent of the Klan's surreptitious, menacing nature.

³⁴ Nancy McLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4-22.

³⁵ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 134-63.

This editorial zeal was not fueled by opposition to the organization's trademark ethnic and religious bigotry, but by concerns over the Klan's extralegal tactics. Though the following articles and incidents include few candid statements on race relations in Roswell and the surrounding area, reading between the lines makes it possible to identify undercurrents of racial and political tension flowing beneath outward reassurances of harmony and cooperation. For communities like Blackdom—in which memories of the persecution suffered at the hands of the original Klan were likely widespread—the rapid growth and popularity of this new “Invisible Empire” must have been an alarming development.³⁶

The editor of the *Roswell Daily Record*, C.E. Mason, consistently penned blistering criticisms of the national Klan organization. In a lengthy editorial written in December of 1921, he wrote, “The words Ku Klux Klan . . . come from exactly the same source from which come the words Anarchy and Bolshevism, for all three are conceived in the same spirit and for the same purpose—the destruction of law and order.”³⁷ For Mason, the vigilante activities of the Klan were decidedly “un-American and cowardly.”

Over a year later, in another tirade against the Ku Klux Klan, Mason claimed: “The order is founded on lawlessness and crime. It makes an outlaw and a criminal of every one of its members.” Repeatedly warning against the dangers of clandestine intimidation, Mason railed, “Nothing good can every come of an organization based on secrecy, defiance of law and intended to terrorize its enemies.”³⁸ In the following weeks, Mason delivered yet another

³⁶ For the proliferation of the Ku Klux Klan in the West during this period of rebirth, see Shawn Lay, ed. *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

³⁷ C.E. Mason, “Ku Klux Klan” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, December 10, 1921.

³⁸ C.E. Mason, “Editorial” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, April 3, 1922.

attack on the negative influences of the Klan's typical vigilante retribution, "We hear almost weekly of disgraceful revolts against the course of the law, of lynching, of mobs, riots. . . . Back of these usually stand fear of the delay of the law."³⁹

Ultimately, Mason viewed these events as symptoms of an ailing American legal system, which failed to protect the weak from the strong. He also reveled in identifying the hypocrisy deeply embedded in the organization's mission and methods: "The *Record* does not believe the Ku Klux Klan is a good thing because . . . it must set aside the laws and the very government of our country to achieve the result it desires."⁴⁰ Klan literature and apologists boasted patriotism, Americanism, and moral authority, but as Mason's regular criticism suggests, the Klan's actions almost invariably defied and undermined the very institutions it claimed to uphold. Nevertheless, Mason repeatedly affirmed the shorthand principles of the Klan, including "upholding the constitution . . . upholding the supremacy of the white race," and encouraging members to "asist [*sic*] and comfort the unfortunate and the needy."⁴¹

These statements reveal an important distinction in Mason's attitude toward the Klan. In his view, it was wholly acceptable, even admirable, for Klan members to advocate for the supremacy of the white race and the Protestant faith. The Klan only drew the newspaperman's ire when this policy of subjugation spilled outside the tidily drawn lines of the Jim Crow legal system and manifested itself in vigilante activities. The citizens of Blackdom daily navigated this social environment. Racial difference and hierarchy were not

³⁹ C.E. Mason, "Editorial" *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, May 19, 1922.

⁴⁰ C.E. Mason, "Editorial" *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, July 31, 1922.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

a question, but a ubiquitous reality. Blackdom's residents proved themselves industrious, educated, self-sufficient, and morally upstanding, but ultimately, they remained implicitly tainted by the social stigma of racial inferiority.

Despite the heated discussions surrounding the beneficence or malignance of the national organization, the archives of the *Daily Record* fail to acknowledge the birth of Roswell's own Klan chapter. Perhaps growing Klan influence threatened Mason's livelihood or even his life. In any case, the tone of the *Daily Record* changed dramatically in the early years of the Roswell chapter's emergence.

Pioneer Chapter No. 15 was founded in 1924, following the resurgence of the national Ku Klux Klan during its "Second Empire." The Roswell Pioneer Klan trumpeted the slogan, "One Country, One Flag, One Language," which had become a something of a rallying cry for the swelling ranks of anti-immigration groups around the nation. The official "Qualifications for Membership" included stipulations that potential Klansmen be "Native born American, White, Gentile," and possess "Good moral character."⁴²

Local historian Elvis Fleming offers a glimpse into the inner sanctum of Roswell's Ku Klux Klan chapter.⁴³ According to Fleming, the first official act of the Klan occurred on February 2, 1924, when a "flaming red cross was burned on South Hill."⁴⁴ In April, the

⁴² "Knights of the Ku Klux Klan: A Fraternal, Patriotic, Benevolent Organization," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, December 1, 1928.

⁴³ Elvis Fleming, "Pioneer Klan No. 15: The Ku Klux Klan in Roswell, 1924-1934," *Southern New Mexico Historical Review* 20 (January 2013): 14-24. Fleming's study draws on records from the private collection owned by a descendant of a Roswell Klan member. At his point in time, Fleming is the only historian to have been granted access to the collection. His article also redacts the names of all members, with the exception of a select few, whose association with the Klan was common knowledge. These circumstances, unfortunately, limit opportunities for further commentary and corroboration.

⁴⁴ Fleming, "Pioneer Klan No. 15," 15.

Pioneer Klan published a sizeable ad on the front page of the *Record*, stating that the purpose of the order was to “pledge our support to the President of the United States, the Constitution thereof, and all amendments thereto.”⁴⁵

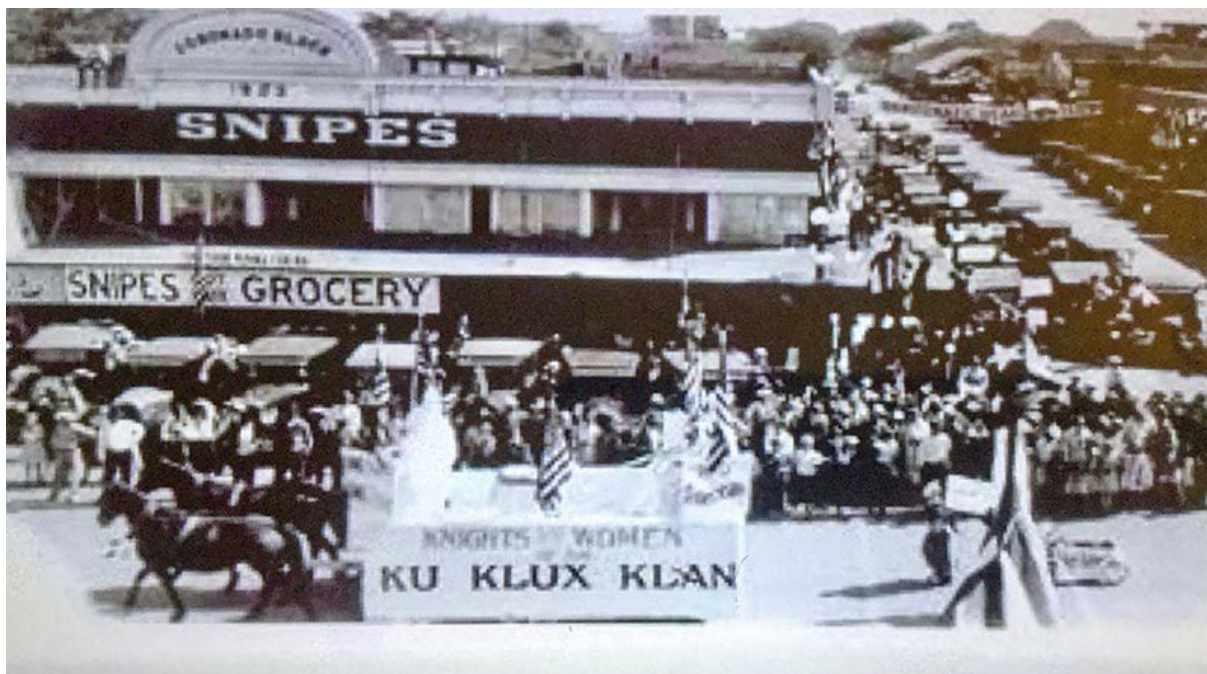


Fig. 2.1 Roswell Pioneer Klan’s entry in the 1926 Cotton Carnival parade. Courtesy of the Historical Society for Southeast New Mexico, Roswell, NM.

No reports of the Klan targeting members of the Blackdom community appear in the archives of the *Daily Record*. However, an ad placed by the Pioneer Klan offered a reward for information about persons making “unauthorized threats” in the Klan’s name. This sort of refutation signifies the presence of racial and religious harassment, whether Klan-sponsored or otherwise.⁴⁶ Around the nation, the practice of publicly denying reported offenses was a common method of Klan deception. Deniability and impunity were staples of the Klan’s

⁴⁵ “Roswell K.K.K. Says Stands for Enforcing Law,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, April 9, 1924.

⁴⁶ “Notice to the Public,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, November 19, 1927.

potent strategy.⁴⁷ Given the *Daily Record*'s propensity toward criticism of the Klan, it seems unlikely that instances of overt criminality or confrontation would have escaped comment unless the cooperation of the paper was ensured by intimidation or infiltration. The relative absence of reported crimes in a locale occupied by the Klan often corresponded with successful railroading tactics throughout the community.⁴⁸ This apparent vacuum of direct racial conflict was also possibly due to the fact that Blackdom had been partially abandoned by the time the Klan chapter was officially organized, rather than racial goodwill or indifference on the part of local Klansmen. The outward signs of acute prejudice, however, were not always pervasive where contact between hostile groups was highest. In fact, limited exposure to "others" often bred deeper animosity and instances of confrontation.⁴⁹

The dearth of reported racial violence by the Ku Klux Klan in Roswell, however, did little to alter the white supremacist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic attitudes expressed by the Klan. The most extreme incident reported by the *Daily Record* occurred on the day of a local primary election. In the predawn hours of March 20, 1928, Roswell citizens awoke to the disturbing sight of three blazing crosses. The crosses were placed near conspicuous locations, including the armory, the local Elk's club, and most prominently, on the front lawn of the Catholic church. Despite a "strenuous denial" from the Klan, the *Daily Record* claimed, "A number of votes would change because of the cross burning," and that the city responded with "rank outrage" at this "attempt to inject religious prejudice in the city primary."⁵⁰ As

⁴⁷ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 166.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

⁵⁰ "Klan Denies Connection with Burning Three Crosses," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, March 20, 1928.

this report demonstrates, the Roswell Pioneer Klan was primarily defined by political and religious intimidation rather than racial violence. However, given the greater Klan's propensity for silencing or distorting public disclosures of their extralegal activities, it remains likely that racially motivated confrontations did indeed occur.

According to Fleming, Roswell Pioneer Chapter No. 15 officially relinquished its Ku Klux Klan charter in June of 1927 and adopted the moniker of the Roswell Benevolent Association.⁵¹ Although the official recognition of the Pioneer Chapter within the national organization may have ended, there is no doubt that Klan activities continued largely unabated. Weekly advertisements in the community events section of the *Daily Record* declared, "Regular Klunklave of Pioneer Klan No. 15 Thursday evening . . . at 8 o'clock, sharp. Be there!"⁵² These announcements were printed regularly until 1932.

Despite the slow decline of the Klan in Roswell, the legacy of racial tension within the community remained formidable. When Blackdom failed, families—such as the Taylors—who abandoned their homesteads and moved into Roswell in search of new beginnings found an atmosphere in which the Klan was widely supported and celebrated. Even after the Klan's eventual dissolution, physical and economic chasms stratified social services and interactions. Like much of the nation, Roswell's schools (and many public institutions) remained segregated until activism from locals like Hazel Parker resulted in

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Klansmen Attention!" *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, July 10, 1930.

policy changes as the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision began to sweep across the country.⁵³

In the minds of its founders, Blackdom was intended to offer escape from the Jim Crow oppression that permeated the South. Frank Boyer and his partners hoped to establish a community beyond the reach of racial animosity, where social uplift, moral character, and economic development were valued and promoted. Despite such lofty aspirations, the shadow of racial difference remained a potent, unavoidable force. Occasionally, cooperation and goodwill supplanted fear and hatred. Sadly, these instances were the exception rather than the rule. The archives of local newspapers and the memories of homesteaders and their descendants depict the spectrum of race relations that defined life for African Americans in Blackdom and surrounding communities. This hidden history offers a unique glimpse into the complexities of racial identity in the New Mexico borderlands and the sometimes-implicit—yet omnipresent—nature of racial tension throughout the Jim Crow era.

⁵³ George M. Cooper, “The Modern Civil Rights Movement in New Mexico, 1955-1975,” in *African American History in New Mexico: Portraits from Five Hundred Years*, ed. Bruce A. Glasrud (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 205; Julien Gorbach, “Tales of Homesteading: Hazel Parker Lives Life Independently” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, November 8, 1999.

III

FOR WANT OF WATER

Blackdom faced adversity stemming from racism and isolation, but these fluctuations of racial animosity were minor elements in the town's disintegration. In New Mexico, racial difference made Blackdom a unique experiment, yet environmental tribulations linked the community to countless other settlements that were thwarted by the environmental challenges of the Great Plains. In the end, a confluence of environmental factors—meteorological, ecological and geological—contributed to Blackdom's failure. Economic circumstances and limited access to technology intertwined to further damage settlers' prospects. My goal in this chapter is to put this environmental crisis in a larger context, telling a tale with much deeper roots than that of the community that emerged at its end. Blackdom will therefore enter this chapter at a relatively late juncture—and yet I propose that we cannot fully understand how Blackdom's own story ended without reference to this broader environmental history.

By the time of Blackdom's founding in the early twentieth century, the ecology of the Pecos Valley had endured an extended period of dramatic alteration. Over the course of a single century, the environmental strains of the ranching frontier—further exacerbated by declining precipitation levels—caused the region's native grasslands to recede before an advancing line of desert scrub. As the cattle kingdoms dwindled, the valley blossomed into an agricultural center, sustained by the life-giving waters of artesian irrigation. The individuals who sought to carve Blackdom from the desert encountered an unfamiliar, changing environment, which ultimately triggered the community's collapse.

In the waning years of the nineteenth century, unfettered access to artesian water remade the Pecos Valley into an agricultural mecca, where “settlement and prosperity advanced rapidly,” making the region “most desirable for the progressive agriculturalist.”¹ When Francis Boyer and Daniel Keys arrived in Chaves County in 1900, this promising agrarian landscape greeted them. Nourished by artesian irrigation, Blackdom’s relatively prosperous beginnings induced optimistic accounts of “land which is the equal of the best land to be found anywhere, and where the climate is ideal,” which circulated as Blackdom flowered alongside neighboring communities.² In 1916, however, the rains faltered. Widespread pumping throughout the basin had lowered the water table, and Blackdom’s shallow wells began to run dry. When confronted with this new reality, the vast majority of Blackdom settlers lacked the environmental and agricultural knowledge, technology, capital, and good fortune to sustain their farms and community during the two-year drought that followed.

Long before Blackdom—or any other pioneer settlements—sprouted along the Pecos River, environmental flux shaped the region. Nestled in a wide trough between two imposing geological formations, the shifting ecosystems of the Pecos Valley reflect its position as a meeting point between plains and desert landscapes. Reacting to the cycling variegations of climate, distinct characteristics of each terrain advanced and receded, waging a battle for dominion in this environmental borderland. Today, the desert scrub of the Lower Sonoran life zone extends upward from the South. Where the plains gradually climb to greet the neighboring mountain ranges at the southern tail of the Rockies, the topography transitions to

¹ “Artesian Wells,” *Artesia (NM) Advocate*, September 19, 1903.

² Lucy Henderson, “Free Land for the Race in Mexico,” *Chicago Defender*, December 21, 1912.

the denser brush of the Upper Sonoran. In the Northwest, the Capitan Mountains protrude above rolling, grassy steppes. On the western horizon, the forested slopes of the Sacramento Mountains blend into the hazy peaks of the Sierra Blancas, the ancestral and modern homeland of the Mescalero Apaches.³

To the East stretches the Llano Estacado, or “Palisaded Plain,” an immense plateau of grassland that rises above the High Plains at the Canadian River, and extends westward from the Caprock Escarpment in the Texas Panhandle before descending at the Mescalero Escarpment and forming the eastern edge of the Pecos Valley.⁴ Fed by springs and snowmelt from the towering Sangre de Cristos in northern New Mexico, the Pecos River trickles past its namesake—an ancient pueblo—and meanders through this basin before draining into the Rio Grande along the boundary between Texas and Coahuila, over 900 sinuous miles from its source.⁵

As western environmental historians have argued, Euro-American pioneers crossing or settling in the Great Plains encountered delicately balanced environments, offering ample opportunities for productivity and severe consequences for mismanagement and hubris.⁶ The

³ Ross Calvin, *Sky Determines: An Interpretation of the Southwest*, 1934 (Repr., Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2016), 9-89.

⁴ The term “Llano Estacado” is more frequently translated as the “staked plain,” which refers to the (possibly apocryphal) use of wooden stakes as landmarks during Coronado’s disastrous expedition from 1539-42. I have chosen to use the less common translation of “palisaded plain,” which describes the elevated plateau that rises to the east of the Pecos Valley.

⁵ See Dan Flores, *Caprock Canyonlands: Journeys into the Heart of the Southern Plains* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 3-21; Patrick Dearen, *Bitter Waters: The Struggles of the Pecos River* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 4-21.

⁶ See Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Donald Worster, *An Unsettled Country: Changing Landscapes of the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

intertwined ideologies of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny that underwrote the conquest and colonization of the West were steeped in mythological portrayals of the environment as untrammelled wilderness, untouched by human hands. In the Euro-American imagination, this seemingly untamed landscape was often interpreted as either “garden” or “desert,” connoting inherent potential for prosperity or ruin.⁷

The southwestern reaches of the Great Plains, while certainly not “virgin,” indeed possessed a wealth of natural resources that remained bountiful before the arrival of a burgeoning pioneer population. Chief among these were the nutrient-rich grasslands that extended across the Great Plains and bled into the desert along the Rio Grande.⁸ These pastures of grama and buffalo grass nourished the herds of bison and wild mustangs, which in turn fueled the nascent hunting and war machines of the Comanches in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With the advent of the ranching and farming frontiers, these perennial grasses faced increasing stress, and eventually yielded before the onslaught of shifting weather patterns, domesticated livestock, and the plow.

Beneath this ocean of grass, however, lurked an even more precious commodity. Before the discovery of the massive Ogallala aquifer stretching from South Dakota to Texas, the insufficiencies of surface water and precipitation across the Great Plains had long deterred widespread settlement and agricultural pursuits. Just as the waters of the Ogallala

⁷ See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, 1950 (Repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 3-12; 165-200. For wide-ranging discussions of land use, ecology, and the transformation of the western environment, see Dan Flores, *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).

⁸ Brandon T. Bestelmayer, Joel R. Brown, Kris M. Havstad, and Ed L. Frederickson, “A Holistic View of an Arid Ecosystem: A Synthesis of Research and Its Applications,” in Kris M. Havstad, Laura F. Huenneke, and William H. Schlesinger, eds., *Structure and Function of a Chihuahuan Desert Ecosystem: The Jornada Basin Long-Term Ecological Research Site* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 354-68.

made habitable vast stretches of the arid plains, the Roswell Artesian Basin would eventually become the lifeblood of several agricultural communities—including Blackdom—that sprouted in the lower Pecos Valley. These riches, however, remained hidden until the waning decades of the nineteenth century.

As the United States concluded its bloody Civil War, the nation's attention returned to the consolidation and incorporation of western lands, invariably at the expense of Native inhabitants. These aggressive policies were first brought to bear in the New Mexico Territory, leading to the confinement of the region's Mescalero Apache and Navajo populations at the Bosque Redondo reservation near Fort Sumner from 1862-68.⁹ During the same period, increasing violence between U.S. military forces and the Comanche along the western edge of the Texas frontier, coupled with virulent epidemics and methodical extermination of bison and horse herds, continually diminished the sphere of Comanche influence until they, too, acquiesced to reservation life in 1875.¹⁰

With the threat of Indian depredations largely neutralized, the fertile floodplains of the Pecos Valley first attracted *nuevomexicano* settlers around 1866. Fifteen miles west of present-day Roswell, a few families established the small community of La Plaza de Missouri along the Hondo River. When excessive irrigation decreased the flow of the Hondo a few years later, the settlement was abandoned. In 1871, Van C. Smith, widely recognized as the founder of Roswell, staked his first official land claim in Chaves County.¹¹ From 1866

⁹ Larson, *Forgotten Frontier*, 37-65.

¹⁰ Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 321-41; S.C. Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon*, 258-307.

¹¹ Fleming and Huffman, *Roundup on the Pecos*, 7-8.

to 1900, the region became an extension of the cattle kingdoms that proliferated across southern Texas. The establishment of a reservation near Bosque Redondo and the military outpost of Fort Sumner quickly created an insatiable demand for beef rations. Well-known cattlemen, including Charles Goodnight, John Chisum, and Oliver Loving, imported the first longhorn cattle from Texas and controlled vast ranching operations that depended upon unrestricted access to open range, surface water, and the regenerative nourishment provided by native grasslands.¹²

Elliott West has portrayed in vivid detail the ravaging effects of overgrazing on the central Great Plains. In the 1840s and 1850s, an unprecedented influx of animals—feral and domestic—converged and competed for sustenance in an environment taxed to the brink of collapse. The patterns of settler migration and Native use overlapped with the natural movements of wildlife, upsetting the cycle of vegetative growth and repeatedly stripping the grass plants of their nutrient reserves. West noted that: “Consistent overgrazing . . . leads to short term problems that compound into long-range calamities.”¹³ As tallgrasses failed, shorter grasses spread and were likewise consumed. This exhausted plains ecosystem thus became increasingly vulnerable when severe weather, erosion, and invasive species threatened the grasslands.¹⁴

Thirty years later—and several hundred miles to the southwest—a similar set of circumstances emerged in the Pecos Valley. By the late 1870s, commercial hunting had

¹² Stephen Bogener, “Land, Speculation, and Manipulation on the Pecos” *Great Plains Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2008), 209-29; Scurlock and Parsons, “Valley, Plains, and Sky,” 39-40; Arrell M. Gibson, “Ranching on the Southern Great Plains” *Journal of the West* 6 (1967), 135-53.

¹³ West, *The Way to the West*, 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-50.

driven the bison to near-extinction across the Great Plains. Newly arrived settlers eradicated the larger predators that threatened their livestock. Prairie dog and jackrabbit populations, whose burrowing habits created hazardous terrain for wandering herds, were exterminated in massive “drives.”¹⁵ Since the initial surge of settlement in the 1870s, at least sixteen wildlife species that once flourished in the Pecos Valley have been completely extinguished.¹⁶

Free-range cattle gravitated to the richest areas of the valley, rapidly denuding the buffalo and grama grasses throughout the plains and lowlands. During the relatively moist years from 1881-85, cattle flourished and the grasses on which the animals subsisted, although stressed, were able to recover and produce new growth. From 1885-86, however, a severe drought gripped much of the region. This dry span, coupled with unusually frigid winter months decimated ranchers’ stock. In some parts of the southern plains, reported cattle losses climbed as high as forty percent.¹⁷ Animals that survived the harsh oscillations of the elements were forced to seek forage in an ecosystem already weakened by continual overgrazing and drought, which further damaged the resilience of native grasses.

As the grasses began to fail, their disappearance was compounded by an influx of scrub brush. This new vegetative growth, consisting primarily of broomweed, catclaw acacia, soapweed yucca, creosote, Russian thistle (tumbleweed), and various cacti, slowly transformed the topography and ecology along the shifting border between the Chihuahuan Desert and the Great Plains.¹⁸ These invaders quickly proved better adapted to the changing

¹⁵ Scurlock and Parsons, “Valley, Plains, and Sky,” 16-17.

¹⁶ Ibid., 59.

¹⁷ Gibson, “Ranching on the Southern Great Plains,” 148-50.

¹⁸ Boyd C. Pratt, and Dan Scurlock, *Llano, River, and Mountains: The Southeast New Mexico Regional Overview* (Santa Fe: New Mexico Historic Preservation Division, 1989), 19-21.

environmental conditions of the lower Pecos Valley. Scrub brush, which typically produces waxy or spiny growth, was less than enticing to even the most ravenous livestock. Such effective natural defense mechanisms, in turn, prompted further grazing strain on the remaining pockets of shrinking grassland.¹⁹

Instead of the shallow, entangled root complexes of the native grasses that once covered vast swaths of the plains, invasive brushy species possess centralized root systems that plunge below the surface, providing access to deeper sources of water. Growth patterns of scrub brush tend to favor individual “patches,” rather than the interconnected networks of extensive grasslands. Receding grasses thus created open soil, which was soon occupied by increasing numbers of opportunistic scrub plants.²⁰ In the progressively dry years from 1888-94, scrub brush flourished as starving cattle continued to decimate increasingly sparse grass cover throughout the valley. Despite intermittent spans of adequate precipitation from 1890-91, the grasslands were too severely stunted to recover. Scrub brush growth profited from these brief wet spells, but offered little nutritional sustenance in return. Settlers’ aversion to fire—and their efforts to suppress the seasonal blazes that destroyed property and limited short-term forage—unintentionally contributed to the proliferation of scrub vegetation.

By 1894, the widespread destruction of grassland due to the intertwined processes of drought, overgrazing, and advancing desertification forced the cattle kingdoms of the far Southwest into permanent decline.²¹ Ranching and stock-farming remained an integral, albeit

¹⁹ Bestelmeyer, et al., “A Holistic View of an Arid Ecosystem,” 355-60.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Pratt and Scurlock, “Llano, River, and Mountains,” 94-101; Gibson, “Ranching on the Southern Great Plains,” 148-52.

diminished, aspect of the regional economy in the decades that followed, but the enclosure of the rangelands paved the way for the advancing farmer's frontier. The continuous shifting of the environment from grassland to desert scrub, combined with the discovery of artesian irrigation and increasing access to eastern produce markets, rapidly transformed the Pecos Valley from ranching domain to agricultural paradise.

Throughout the middle decades of the nineteenth century, observant travelers and explorers had frequently commented on the untapped potential of arable lands along the river valleys of the Southwest. While journeying from Santa Fe to Chihuahua in 1839, merchant and naturalist Josiah Gregg remarked of the floodplains of the Rio Grande:

The river bottoms of the valley, many of which are of rich alluvial loam, have lain fallow . . . and will perhaps continue to be neglected until the genius of civilization shall have spread its beneficent influences over the land. . . . It too frequently happens that the best lands of the settlements remain unfruitful for want of water."²²

Nearly four decades later, intrepid soldier and geologist John Wesley Powell published his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Regions of the United States*, in which he declared that: "The arid lands, so far as they can be redeemed by irrigation, will perennially yield bountiful crops, as the means for their redemption involves their constant fertilization."²³ Powell discerningly understood that water was paramount in the determination of settlement patterns and productive use of western lands. As if in answer to these assessments, the conquest of the land and rapid modernization of irrigation techniques allowed pioneer farmers to coax gardens from the desert of the Pecos Valley.

²² Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, ed. Max L. Moorhead, 1844 (Repr., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 269.

²³ John Wesley Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States, With a More Detailed Account of the Lands of Utah* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879), viii.

Irrigation was first practiced in the 1860s by early *nuevomexicano* settlers, who dug acequias and drew water from the Hondo and Pecos Rivers. An influx of Euro-American population after 1870 led to a variety of agricultural pursuits. In addition to his ranching empire, John Chisum was among the first settlers in the area to utilize irrigation ditches on his Jingle Bob Ranch near the South Spring River, where he planted wheat, rye, alfalfa, and apple trees. By the late 1870s, peach and apple orchards thrived across the valley. The geographic extents of these methods were, however, limited by proximity to surface water sources.²⁴

The decline of the ranching industry in southeastern New Mexico coincided with the rise of artesian irrigation. In 1890, while digging an unusually deep well on his property, Roswell businessman Nathan Jaffa struck gold. The substance he stumbled upon was not the metallic element that had inaugurated a frenzied rush to California in 1848, nor was it the “black gold” that would gush from the depths of the Texas and New Mexico oilfields in the decades to come. The geyser that erupted from Jaffa’s well was pure artesian water, stored for millennia in shallow, naturally pressurized aquifers. His discovery heralded the rapid transformation of southeastern New Mexico into an expectant agricultural paradise, sustained by the subterranean waters of the Roswell Artesian Basin.²⁵ By 1891, the newly formed Jaffa

²⁴ Pratt and Scurlock, “Llano, Mountains, and River,” 105-07; Morgan Nelson, “Early History of Water in the Middle Pecos Valley,” (Unpublished: Morgan Nelson Personal Collection, 1999), 1-5; Gilbert Fite, *The Farmers’ Frontier, 1865-1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 175-92. For an extensive history of irrigation in the Pecos Valley, see Stephen Bogener, *Ditches Across the Desert: Irrigation in the Lower Pecos Valley* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2003).

²⁵ Accounts of the first artesian wells in Roswell can be found in the following works: Maurice G. Fulton, *Roswell in Its Early Years* (Roswell: Hall-Poorbaugh Press, 1963), 42-43; Elvis E. Fleming and Minor S. Huffman, eds., *Roundup on the Pecos* (Roswell: Chaves County Historical Society, 1978), 17-18; Carole Larson, *Forgotten Frontier: The Story of Southeastern New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 82; Morgan Nelson, “Early History of Water in the Middle Pecos Valley,” (Unpublished: Morgan Nelson Personal Collection, 1999), 1-2; Cassius A. Fisher, *U.S.G.S. Preliminary Report on the Geology and*

& Prager company crowed, “the artesian well business on a regular boom,” and the *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican* reported that: “Roswell citizens can, since the success of the first experiment, now secure an artesian well almost anywhere for \$250.”²⁶

Despite the “wild enthusiasm over the prospects of artesian wells,” local residents quickly realized the drawbacks of their newfound asset.²⁷ When wells were bored, few mechanisms existed to cap or control the flows. Excess water pooled into boggy ponds or trickled along the gentle slope of the valley before being absorbed into the dusty soil. Initially, the waters were thought to be limitless, but these early prognostications proved overblown. As growing numbers of settlers throughout the Pecos Valley punctured the aquifer to supply their households, livestock, and crops, the natural pressure of the basin gradually began to diminish. Flows decreased, and in some locations, ceased altogether. Growing concerns over the shrinking availability of this precious resource prompted increasing legislative and bureaucratic oversight. In 1905, New Mexico’s Territorial Legislature set forth guidelines and penalties for the waste of artesian waters. Four years later, this law was amended, imposing strict limits on drilling and extraction and requiring approval from a designated “artesian well supervisor” whenever wells were installed or repaired.²⁸

Underground Waters of the Roswell Artesian Area, New Mexico (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1906), 25.

²⁶ “Round About Town,” *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*, January 23, 1981.

²⁷ Fleming and Huffman, *Roundup on the Pecos*, 17-18.

²⁸ Albert G. Fiedler and S. Spencer Nye, *Geology and Ground-Water Resources of the Roswell Artesian Basin, New Mexico* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1933), 285-87; Ira G. Clark, *Water in New Mexico: A History of Its Management and Use* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 235.



Fig. 3.1 Artesian well next to the Pecos Valley and Northeastern Railroad depot, 1892. Courtesy of the Historical Society for Southeast New Mexico, Roswell, NM.

Nathan Jaffa's 1890 discovery altered the landscape of the Pecos Valley. Although the effects of overgrazing and desertification had devastated the grasslands, vast swaths of the valley still contained rich, farmable land. As the desert advanced, destruction of the dense root systems of native grasses promoted soil that was relatively compliant beneath the plough. Just as Gregg and Powell had suggested, the key to agricultural success across the arid West was water—and without it, the garden would be mercilessly reclaimed by the desert. The development of artesian wells allowed the cultivation of lands that had previously been too distant from the area's rivers and springs for effective irrigation via acequias and ditches.

Settlers flocked to Roswell in droves, hoping to claim homesteads and a share in the area's agricultural boom. The 1890 census listed the city's population at just 343. By 1900, that number had ballooned to 2,049 and Chaves County as a whole contained 4,773 people.²⁹ In 1899, the *Santa Fe New Mexican* reported: "Down at Roswell, the people amuse themselves with a contest as to which can secure the deepest artesian well, as in other towns neighbors vie with one another in building fine homes." Despite drastic fluctuations in precipitation beginning in 1895, this "embarrassment of riches . . . made the fertile soil of the townsite a place of luxuriant green; prettier yards and gardens can be found nowhere." Engineers had by that time devised means of controlling the flows, but the *New Mexican* noted: "Taking care of the deluge is becoming somewhat of a burden and still more wells are going down. The stream from a well is easily shut off, but is rarely checked because it is a delight to see the water." The report also estimated that, "the constant discharge of the wells probably exceeds 50,000 gallons per hour, or 1,200,000 gallons per day."³⁰

Nurtured by this seemingly limitless supply of artesian water, the Pecos Valley blossomed into the mythical vision of the West that tantalized the American imagination: the garden of inexhaustible natural bounty. Throughout the nineteenth century, columns of pioneer immigrants streamed westward, buoyed by faith in a host of pseudo-scientific theories that promoted climatological manipulation and agricultural exploitation. In spite of their stout convictions, the vast majority of western settlers abjectly discovered that rain did

²⁹ Richard L. Forstall, ed., *Population of States and Counties of the United States: 1790-1990* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996); Fleming and Huffman, *Roundup on the Pecos*, 16-19.

³⁰ "Water at Roswell," *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*, July 5, 1899.

not “follow the plow.”³¹ The Pecos Valley, however, appeared as a wonderful exception to the overarching axioms of aridity: “If Roswell does not become a big city it will not be because nature did not intend that place for a metropolis. The water is good to drink. It is excellent for irrigation. It is sufficient for fire purposes, and if puncturing the earth upon every lot is to continue, the water may serve as a supply for a canal to run to points beyond the artesian belt.”³²

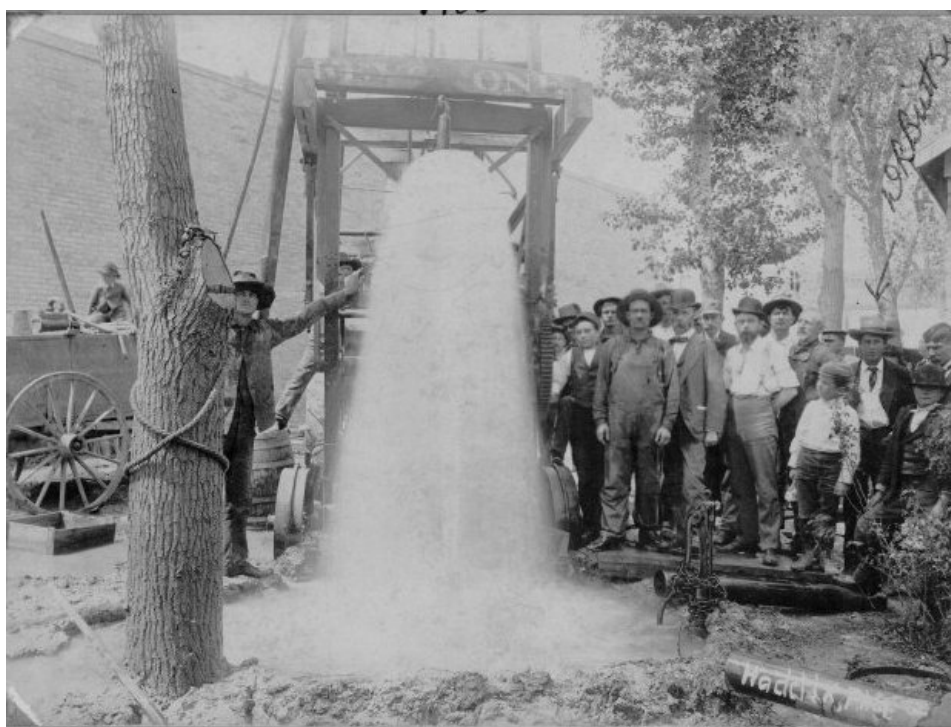


Fig. 3.2 Artesian well near Main Street in Roswell, circa 1895. Courtesy of the Historical Society for Southeast New Mexico, Roswell, NM.

In 1902, Algie Martin Simons, a young political activist and newspaperman, published *The American Farmer*, which outlined the history and future of agriculture across

³¹ For a detailed exposition on a variety of “Vagaries of the Search for Water,” see Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*, 1931 (Repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 375-82.

³² “Water at Roswell,” *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*, July 5, 1899.

North America. In no uncertain terms, Simons presented the daunting prospects that awaited aspiring homesteaders in the arid West:

From the 98th meridian West to the Rocky Mountains there is a stretch of country whose history is filled with more tragedy, and whose future is pregnant with greater promise than perhaps any other equal expanse of territory within the confines of the Western Hemisphere. . . . Following the times of occasionally rainy seasons, the line of social advance rose and fell with rain and drouth, like a mighty tide beating against the tremendous wall of the Rockies. And every such wave left behind it a mass of human wreckage in the shape of broken fortunes, deserted farms, and ruined homes.³³

Although Simons was writing well before Blackdom's founding and failure, his rendering captured the potential for prosperity that attracted Exoduster settlers to Chaves County, as well as the bleak fate they eventually suffered.

Walter Prescott Webb echoed these sentiments in his seminal 1931 study, in which he pronounced that early generations of pioneers had foundered when confronted by the environmental challenges of the "level, treeless, and sub-humid" Great Plains. According to Webb, the legacy of settlement on the Great Plains was not a victorious saga of man's dominion over nature, but rather a parable of repeated failure, resilience, and adaptation. Although Webb's protagonists were the Anglo-Saxon stock of the Turnerian frontier—not the descendants of former slaves—his interpretations remain predominantly accurate when applied to Blackdom's struggles. The environmental and agricultural knowledge transported from the moisture-laden regions of the South failed Blackdom's Exoduster settlers, and they simply did not possess the technology or capital to survive the lean years that invariably accompanied life on the plains. This failure, however, did not make Blackdom unique.³⁴

³³ A.M. Simons, *The American Farmer* (Chicago: C.H. Kerr & Company, 1902), 55.

³⁴ Webb, *The Great Plains*, 7-9.

Webb insisted that on the Great Plains, the “search for water . . . would include well-making and windmills, irrigation, and dry farming, all representative of man’s effort to make hidden water available, to make a little water go a long way.”³⁵ Indeed, Blackdom settlers pursued each of these strategies, to little avail. The Blackdom townsite was located nearly thirteen miles west of the Pecos River and over ten miles southeast from the Hondo River. The combination of distance and elevation rendered ditch irrigation from either the Pecos or the Hondo impossible. Some settlers attempted to haul water from nearby farms and ranches, but these endeavors eventually proved too expensive and inefficient.³⁶

At the turn of the twentieth century, the burgeoning field of agricultural science promoted the “wonderful system of dry farming” as the answer to the agricultural challenges posed by the western environment. This “propaganda,” often based on dubious scientific evidence, was “pushed on by high prices of produce and by every kind of land speculator and machinery seller.”³⁷ Aspirational Blackdom farmers, many of whom had transplanted their families to New Mexico from the humid climate of the southern states, attempted to incorporate these techniques on their homesteads. Dry farming, aside from the unmerited claims of hucksters and con men, was in fact a legitimate method of agricultural practice. Contrary to the “extravagant claims” of this “American invention” that proliferated among,

³⁵ Ibid., 320-21.

³⁶ Helena Wagoner Collins, interview by Robert Anderson, March 18, 2007, transcript, Robert Anderson Personal Collection, transcript.

³⁷ J. Russell Smith, “The Real Dry-Farmer,” in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, Volume CXXVII, December 1913–May 1914 (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1914), 836-47.

“magazines” and “dry-farming congresses,” the procedure had been perfected in China and Tunisia centuries before it emerged on the Great Plains.³⁸

The soils of the Great Plains possess “a fertility of which the humid East knows little.” In regions that enjoy ample precipitation, the earth’s organic nutrients are often diluted and carried away with excess water. Because the “sub-humid” reaches of the West consistently receive less than twenty-five inches of annual rainfall, this process of “leaching” occurs at a much lower rate than in wetter environments. Thus, when proper levels of moisture are available, either through precipitation or irrigation, these lands are capable of becoming “veritable mines of fertility.”³⁹

Dry farming is best suited to regions that receive between ten and twenty inches of annual rainfall. In an ideal circumstance, this moisture would be concentrated during a cool, wet season, which allows for nutrient accumulation and crop cultivation during an extended warm, dry season.⁴⁰ Aside from occasional winter storms, the lower Pecos Valley normally receives the majority of its precipitation during the monsoon season in late-summer. These reversed seasonal cycles, although relatively predictable, diminished the effectiveness of dry farming attempts in Blackdom. Additionally, predicting when the rains would arrive was far easier than estimating the amount of moisture that might accumulate from year to year.

After an unusually wet span in 1883-84, the following three decades accrued significant precipitation losses with only brief periods of minor gains. Since 1878, when climate data was first recorded by the U.S. Weather Bureau, Chaves County has averaged

³⁸ Ibid., 841.

³⁹ Webb, *The Great Plains*, 17-26; Smith, “The Real Dry-Farmer,” 839.

⁴⁰ Smith, “The Real Dry-Farmer,” 840.

between thirteen and sixteen inches of rainfall per year, with slight discrepancies between various reporting locations. From 1900 to 1930, however, this number consistently remained well below sixteen inches. In fact, in five separate years over those three decades, measured rainfall was less than six inches. One former Blackdom resident recalled this tumultuous period:

They [fellow settlers] depended on rainfall for their moisture and they weren't used to having to irrigate. That was the thing that they just couldn't seem to understand, that they wouldn't get enough moisture to raise their crops. Some years they would have corn and such things as that. . . And they would have pretty good crops because we had some very wet winters in those years.⁴¹

Successful dry farming requires predictable levels and cycles of precipitation, a deep familiarity with complex agronomy techniques, and sufficiently diversified operations capable of surviving multiple poor harvests. Blackdom farmers possessed none of these luxuries. Unfortunate timing and inadequate agricultural knowledge, combined with shifting climate and seasonal patterns of rainfall, undermined the feasibility of dry farming in Blackdom.⁴²

The ineffectiveness of ditch irrigation and dry farming forced Blackdom farmers to seek alternative options for acquiring water. Some installed small piston pumps and windmills to exploit the shallow alluvial aquifer of the Roswell Artesian Basin. The basin consists of two distinct aquifer layers. The artesian aquifer is deeper and more hydraulically productive. Divided from this artesian aquifer by a rocky confining bed, a much smaller

⁴¹ Lillian Collins, interview with Elvis Fleming, March 18, 1975, MS F802 C.5 W.4, Blackdom Morgue File, transcript, HSSNM.

⁴² Climatological data and dry farming analysis drawn, in part, from Regge N. Wiseman, "Precipitation, Dry-Land Farming, and Blackdom," in *Glimpses of Late Frontier Life in New Mexico's Southern Pecos Valley: Archaeology and History at Blackdom and Seven Rivers* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico, Office of Archaeology Studies, 2000), 49-50; Fisher, *Waters of the Roswell Artesian Area*, 29; Morgan Nelson, "Roswell Water Data Files," Morgan Nelson Personal Collection.

alluvial aquifer lies closer to the surface.⁴³ Blackdom was located at the edge of a high-yield pocket within the lower artesian aquifer. This rich, pressurized water supply, however, was inaccessible due to the physical conditions of the eponymous Blackdom terrace—an elevated ridge that rises imperceptibly above the minor tributary channels to the west of the Pecos River. This geological feature increased the distance between the surface and the water table from roughly twenty-five feet to nearly one hundred feet in some areas. Several years after Blackdom’s collapse, a 1933 study conducted by the U.S.G.S. found that: “Owing to its higher altitude and consequent greater depth to the water level in wells, the area occupied by the Blackdom terrace is utilized only for stock grazing.”⁴⁴

Several Blackdom settlers discovered the futility of maintaining the cultivation quotas set forth in the Homestead Act. One such individual, Ezell Ragsdale, filed his initial homestead claim on March 5, 1914.⁴⁵ Unlike his father, Clinton Ragsdale, who became the most prosperous farmer in Blackdom, the younger Ragsdale achieved little agrarian success. In May of 1920, he filed an application requesting a reduction of cultivation requirements, reporting various agricultural difficulties:

The rain fall is not sufficient for farming. . . I have made a failure of farming, I planted crops for three years and did not harvest anything to speak of, plowing kills

⁴³ Peggy S. Johnson, Lewis A. Land, L. Greer Price, and Frank Titus, eds., *Water Resources of the Lower Pecos Region, New Mexico: Science, Policy, and a Look to the Future* (Socorro: New Mexico Bureau of Geology and Mineral Resources, 2003), 9-43. I am particularly indebted to a brief series of notes compiled in the Robert Anderson Personal Collection, which pointed me toward several invaluable water reports and studies.

⁴⁴ Fiedler and Nye, *Geology and Ground-Water Resources of the Roswell Artesian Basin*, 12-25. See also, Robert T. Bean, *Geology of the Roswell Artesian Basin, New Mexico, and Its Relation to the Hondo Reservoir* (Santa Fe: Office of the State Engineer, Technical Division, Reports Section, 1957), 5.

⁴⁵ Ezell Ragsdale, Homestead Application and Affidavit, Application No. 028299, March 5, 1914, Roswell Land Office, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection.

the grass and tumble weeds and loco grow in place of grass and the loco is a poison weed . . . I ask to be relieved from all cultivation and that grazing be accepted.⁴⁶

In his Final Proof, which was filed a few weeks later on June 22, 1920, he lamented: “I have planted and cultivated on my original entry 20 acres each year . . . to general farm crops, but have never harvested a crop on account of drouth. Being in the Army in 1918 and 1919 I did not plant this land.”⁴⁷ In similar fashion, Loney K. Wagoner established residency on his homestead in October of 1916 and later filed an agricultural reduction petition around the same time as Ezell Ragsdale. Wagoner blamed both the climate and invasive weed species for his farming ordeals:

The winters are cold and the summer nights cool. Hot dry winds prevail during the summer months. The rainfall . . . is very uncertain to try to raise any crops in this country, and after the land has been plowed up the grass will not return, but Russian Thistles and Blue Weed come in place of the grass. My homestead grows good native grass and I consider it more valuable for that purpose.⁴⁸

The vagaries of precipitation and unusually productive access to groundwater via windmill pumping allowed Clinton Ragsdale’s farming endeavors to flourish while most other farms, like those of Ezell Ragsdale and Loney Wagoner, languished in the plains environment.

Although increasingly difficult due to the geological structure of the Blackdom terrace, it remained possible to draw ground water to the surface in small quantities. Powered manually or by wind, piston pumps and windmills provided access to the shallow waters of the alluvial aquifer. This allowed for the irrigation of small vegetable gardens and patches of

⁴⁶ Ezell Ragsdale, Application for Reduction of the Required Area of Cultivation, Application No. 042255, May 13, 1920, Roswell Land Office, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection.

⁴⁷ David Proffit, Homestead Entry Final Proof—Testimony of Witness, Application No. 042255, June 22, 1920, Roswell Land Office, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection.

⁴⁸ Loney K. Wagoner, Application for Reduction of the Required Area of Cultivation, Application No. 032480, March 23, 1920, Roswell Land Office, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection.

forage crops, including corn, sorghum, and kaffir. Some settlers even attempted to plant trees, which have long-since disappeared:

There weren't many trees, that was all plain out there. . . . We had mulberry trees in our front yard. . . . Most people would haul their water from the windmills that the cattlemen had out there . . . there were trees planted around the tanks—cottonwoods and things like that. . . . Several people had little apple trees or peach trees . . . if they had a windmill . . . they could do pretty good, but if you had to haul your water, like most of them did, for a long period of time you couldn't haul no water.⁴⁹

These shallow wells provided just enough water for survival. Current farmers in the area receive an annual allotment of 3.5 acre feet of water for each acre of land under cultivation. In years of inadequate or unpredictable precipitation levels, this quantity can be insufficient for crop cultivation.⁵⁰ Even at maximum levels of production, windmills and piston pumps that tapped the alluvial aquifer would have been incapable of producing enough water to successfully irrigate farmland beyond the extent of basic subsistence crops. This reality severely constrained Blackdom farmers' access to markets and prevented them from accruing additional capital. In years of plenty, this was not necessarily an issue. When wells dried up and their crops failed, however, dependence on subsistence farming meant that Blackdom settlers lacked the financial resources to drill and pump deeper wells.

⁴⁹ Lillian Collins, interview with Elvis Fleming, March 18, 1975, MS F802 C.5 W.4, Blackdom Morgue File, transcript, HSSNM.

⁵⁰ Morgan Nelson, "Bahr Report on Interstate Stream Commission," July 24, 1998, Morgan Nelson Personal Collection.



Fig. 3.3 Well and piston pump near Blackdom homestead. Photo by Claire Stasiewicz.

In response to growing concerns of diminished flows throughout the basin, the U.S.G.S. commissioned the first study of the Roswell Artesian Basin in 1906. The paper reported: “It is believed that there is no cause for fear that the water supply throughout the northern part of the Roswell basin will give out or become inadequate for all requirements under proper economy of practice.” Their generally optimistic tone notwithstanding, the authors continued to advocate for “suitable valves . . . so that the flow can be shut down,” and urged “greater economy on the part of the users of well water throughout the Roswell

basin.”⁵¹ Despite the passage of legislation in 1905 and 1909 that sought to limit new wells and require additional monitoring on those already in place, the aquifer continued to hemorrhage.⁵²

Between 1905 and 1915, an additional 986 wells were installed, bringing the total number of active wells throughout the basin to 1,318. Although the drilling bonanza slackened after 1915, the damage was done. By 1925, “the area in which flowing wells could be found shrank from an original 663 square miles to 425 square miles . . . it was evident that the pressure in the aquifer was declining.”⁵³ In many parts of the basin, water no longer gushed to the surface as it had for nearly three decades since Nathan Jaffa’s discovery.

When the natural pressure of the artesian aquifer began to dwindle, pumping and drilling technology became the predominant factors in determining how and where water could be retrieved. The windmills and small piston pumps used by Blackdom farmers were incapable of penetrating the rocky sediments of the Blackdom terrace. One former homesteader, when asked about the possibility of drilling to reach the receding subterranean

⁵¹ Fisher, *Report on the Geology and Underground Waters of the Roswell Artesian Area*, 25.

⁵² Fiedler and Nye, *Geology and Ground-Water Resources of the Roswell Artesian Basin*, 285-87; Clark, *Water in New Mexico*, 235. The creation of the Pecos Valley Artesian Conservancy District in 1932 began a process of water rights reclamation, management, and aggressive policy actions that continue to shape the water resources of the region today. Although the series of legislative measures that began in 1905 placed restrictions on the installation of new wells, the area around Blackdom was not included in this prohibition until 1942, thus, Blackdom residents were hindered less by legal impediments than by insufficient capital and technology. The Pecos River Compact of 1948 greatly increased pressure on the PVACD to regulate and reclaim existing wells. See G. Emlen Hall, *High and Dry: The Texas-New Mexico Struggle for the Pecos River* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

⁵³ Johnson, et al., eds., *Water Resources of the Lower Pecos Region*, 63.

waters, responded, “You couldn’t get the well through because of the rock. You’d have to go through rock. And I mean it was solid rock!”⁵⁴

Centrifugal pumps, widely used by Pecos Valley farmers to tap the shallow aquifer, were only effective at depths of twenty-five feet or less. With the water table continually descending, many farmers were forced to dig deep pits and install pumps below the surface. In some cases, these pits plunged “as deep as eighty feet.” By the 1930s, the invention of the Peerless pump created a more powerful extractive apparatus, capable of drawing water to the surface from any depth.⁵⁵ This equipment allowed the continued viability of agriculture in the Pecos Valley, but “eventually the expense of the water became so great in some parts of the area that farming was no longer economically feasible and many farms were abandoned and reverted to their former state of nonproductiveness.”⁵⁶ Regardless of the geological challenges that hindered Blackdom’s development and sustainability, potential solutions invariably required access to substantial amounts of capital, which Blackdom settlers simply did not possess.

In the summer of 1922, articles noting Blackdom’s demise appeared in newspapers across the state. The *Albuquerque Morning Journal* lamented, “One of the most interesting experiments in negro colonization that has occurred in this section of the state did not prove

⁵⁴ Hazel Parker, interview, in Maisha Baton and Henry Walt, *A History of Blackdom, N.M., in the Context of the African-American Post-Civil War Colonization Movement*. (Santa Fe: Office of Cultural Affairs, Historic Preservation District, 1996), 8.

⁵⁵ James Riley Norris, interview with Morgan Nelson, May 29, 1986, transcript, Morgan Nelson Personal Collection. For a wealth of information on the mechanics and evolution of pumping technology, see P.L. Frankel, *FAO Irrigation and Drainage Paper 43: Water Lifting Devices* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1986). For a useful history of windmills and their role in the agricultural development of the American West, see Christopher C. Gillis, *Still Turning: A History of Aermotor Windmills* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2015).

⁵⁶ Fiedler and Nye, *Geology and Ground-Water Resources of the Roswell Artesian Basin*, 284-85.

as successful as many desired . . . The colored inhabitants soon realized that their capital was not sufficient to drill for water.⁵⁷ The following day, the *Artesia Pecos Valley News* published a similar notice, reporting that “Blackdom has passed its better days and the Negro town and church are no more.”⁵⁸ The Blackdom church was sold to the nearby community of Cottonwood, where it was used by a Methodist congregation for several years.⁵⁹ The building is now a private residence on the outskirts of Artesia.

In July of 1925, the Blackdom Townsite Company was included on the “Delinquent Tax List” published in the *Roswell Daily Record*. The Company owed a total of \$18.66 in unpaid taxes, while Frank Boyer and three other individuals owed sums ranging from \$1.25 to \$7.72.⁶⁰ The Boyers, however, had already abandoned their homestead and moved to Vado, New Mexico, in search of a fresh start. When Blackdom’s institutions—school, general store, postal service, and church—collapsed, members of the community found themselves increasingly dependent on surrounding towns for supplies and services. Declining farms and failing water sources caused many former homesteaders to become dependent on wage work to support their households. Slowly, the families whose scattered dwellings had formed Blackdom were absorbed into nearby towns.

⁵⁷ “Negro Colonization Scheme in Chaves Co. Proves to be Failure,” *Albuquerque (NM) Morning Journal*, June 8, 1922.

⁵⁸ “Notice,” *Artesia (NM) Pecos Valley News*, June 9, 1922.

⁵⁹ Baton, *History of Blackdom*, 9.

⁶⁰ “Delinquent Tax List: Dist. No. 24, Blackdom,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, July 11, 1925.



Fig. 3.4 Abandoned Blackdom Baptist Church, date unknown. Courtesy of the Historical Society for Southeast New Mexico, Roswell, NM.

Arriving in the early twentieth century, these ambitious Exoduster settlers confronted an unfamiliar environment in the throes of successive, far-reaching metamorphoses. They were severely handicapped by fluctuations of climate that accompanied those ecological shifts. Geology and geography also conspired to form barriers to resources that determined whether agricultural subsistence in the Pecos Valley was possible. Even chronologically, Blackdom was deeply unlucky. In the years that immediately followed Blackdom's disintegration, technological advances that would likely have alleviated many of their problems became widely available. Ultimately, Blackdom joined the ranks of countless homesteaders and settlements whose hopes were vanquished by the merciless environment of the Great Plains. Like the precious waters that sustained Blackdom, Francis Boyer's vision of

a self-sufficient community in the Southwest borderlands evaporated, leaving behind a haunted landscape tinged with painful memories of failure and loss.

EPILOGUE:

MISSING MEMORIALS

In the finale of the Netflix western series, *Godless*, an all-black community of former slaves and buffalo soldiers in northern New Mexico is brutally massacred by a marauding band of outlaws.¹ Although the fictional settlement (misplaced both chronologically and geographically) where the slaughter takes place is named “Blackdom,” this tragic downfall bears little resemblance to that of its historical counterpart.² Whether intentional or otherwise, this unique intersection of Blackdom and popular culture offers an interesting potential explanation for the community’s discernible absence from both the historical record and public memory.

The history of the American West is peppered with massacres and decidedly one-sided engagements. Some remain relatively obscure outside local and regional spheres, like the Mountain Meadows massacre of 1857 or the Camp Grant massacre of 1871.³ Others—particularly Sand Creek, Wounded Knee, and Little Bighorn—continually reverberate through our national consciousness. In the last decade or so, well-received scholarly works on multiple events of a similar nature have traced the creation and evolution of historical memory in the aftermath of dreadful violence. Within this proliferation of books, scholars have explored the effects of shifting meaning, contextualization, and presentation while physical memorials are funded, designed, and erected. Throughout this process, during which

¹ “Homecoming,” *Godless*, season 1, episode 7, Netflix, originally aired November 22, 2017.

² The creators and writers of the *Godless* series have offered no indication as to whether their depiction of Blackdom was inspired by New Mexico’s factual black community.

³ For the landmark study of the Camp Grant Massacre, see Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: An Apache Massacre and the Violence of History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

history and memory invariably become intertwined and are repeatedly politicized and massaged for divergent purposes, the narratives surrounding these events can become warped, sometimes beyond recognition. The distinct cases of the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, and Little Bighorn Indian Memorial each highlight the ways in which the historical commemoration of violent acts (whether in celebration or mourning) can easily be twisted to divergent political and cultural ends.⁴

Despite the bloodshed that swept through the fictional community of Blackdom in *Godless*, the real Blackdom suffered no such moment of acute annihilation. Instead, Blackdom shared its piecemeal denouement with countless other western communities whose resources ultimately proved insufficient to support their occupants. Thus, the Blackdom community endured an extended period of deterioration and abandonment, rather than the gruesome climax portrayed in *Godless*. Given our nation's seemingly inexhaustible fascination with violence and the memorialization of such bloody confrontations, if the tragic circumstances of this cinematic rendering had actually come to pass, it is likely—albeit through a rather grim brand of irony—that Blackdom would enjoy a more prominent position in the history of both New Mexico and the black town movement.

Although wanton destruction typically provokes greater commemorative passion than does quiet dissipation, three distinct Blackdom memorial projects emerged nearly a century after the Townsite Company's original incorporation. Only one of these visions ever reached

⁴ For illuminating works dealing with commemoration efforts and conflicts at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and Little Bighorn Indian Memorial, see Michael Elliott, *Custerology: The Enduring Legacy of the Indian Wars and George Armstrong Custer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and for the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, see Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

fruition, but the recurrent pattern that emerges—diligent labor, followed by minor successes, and tempered by eventual failure—echoes the very history of the community that a group of devoted individuals hoped to memorialize.

The first of these projects was initially promoted in 1998 by Dusty Huckabee, a self-described Blackdom enthusiast and member of the Roswell City Council at the time.

Huckabee, along with support from Roswell mayor Tom Jennings and his brother, Tim Jennings, a state legislator, allocated one thousand dollars from the coffers of the Mainstreet Roswell Project toward the rudimentary enterprise.⁵ The city council eventually selected Melanie Archer and Thomas O’Neal—a pair of architectural students from Hampton University in Virginia—to design a series of commemorative installations for Cahoon Park in the northwestern section of the city. The interns arrived in Roswell in June of 1998 and spent much of the summer studying the community’s scattered history and surveying the remnants of various Blackdom homesteads.⁶

⁵ Dusty Huckabee, interview with author, March 13, 2018, Roswell, NM.

⁶ Andrew Poertner, “Researching the Past: Hampton Interns Study Blackdom,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, August 7, 1998.



Fig. 4.1 Scattered rubble and foundations of a Blackdom homestead. Photo by Claire Stasiewicz.

In August, after nearly two months of research and preparation, Archer and O’Neal unveiled their preliminary designs on the steps of the Chaves County Courthouse during the celebration of Roswell’s 125th anniversary. In addition to various sculptural components, the plans included “recreations of the town’s church and school, a replica of the ruins and a fabricated archaeological site,” where children could “excavate replicated artifacts.”⁷ The overarching mission of the memorial, as stated in the preliminary design proposal, was to “capture and evoke the lost essence of the community,” namely: freedom, opportunity, and cooperation.⁸

⁷ Andrew Poertner, “Interns Unveil Plans to Honor Old Township,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, August 24, 1998.

⁸ Melanie Archer and Thomas O’Neal, “Proposal for Blackdom Memorial in Cahoon Park,” n.d., A/C 971024, Box 41, Blackdom Miscellanea, HSSNM.

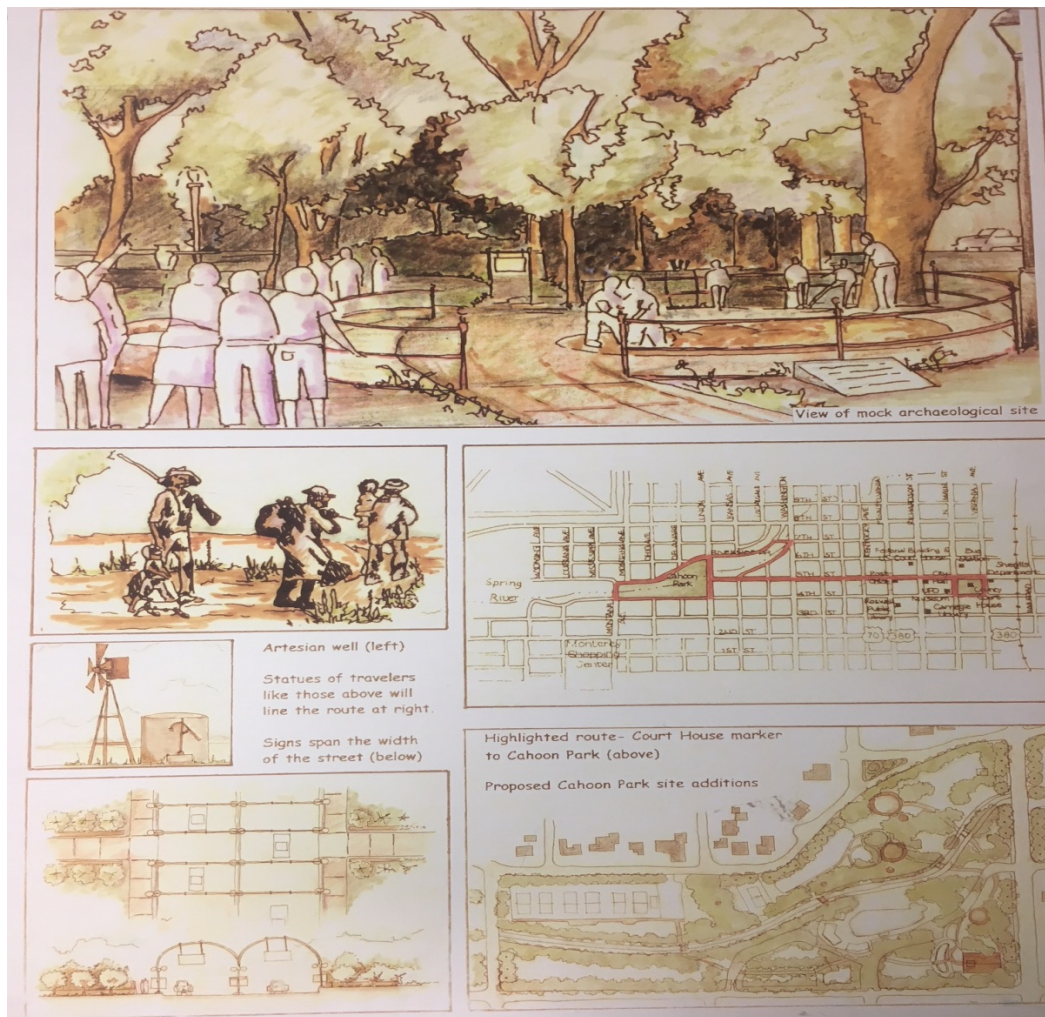


Fig. 4.2 Preliminary designs for the Cahoon Park memorial. Courtesy of the Rodney Bowe Personal Collection, Albuquerque, NM.

Despite the celebratory tone of the *Record* article, which also reported pledges of support from the New Mexico Main Street Program and the New Mexico Economic Development Department, the project never proceeded past this announcement. According to Huckabee, after the students returned to Virginia to resume their studies for the fall semester, difficulties posed by distance, poor communication, and funding procurement caused the

Cahoon Park memorial project to wither. Following this disappointing setback, Huckabee and the Jennings brothers regrouped and set their sights on a more manageable goal.⁹

The second—and only successful—attempt to commemorate Blackdom came in the form of a New Mexico historic marker installed along a desolate stretch of U.S. Highway 285, which connects Roswell and Artesia. When the overly ambitious Cahoon Park project collapsed, a simple roadside plaque seemed an attainable next step, and the revised project was soon bolstered by an influx of organizational leadership. In 2000, Landjur Abukusumo, an Albuquerque arson investigator-turned-pastor, moved to Roswell to become the new minister of Washington Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church. A lifelong civil rights activist and native New Yorker, Abukusumo assumed the role of president in the Chaves County chapter of the NAACP.¹⁰ With the Reverend at the helm, Roswell’s NAACP soon joined forces with Dusty Huckabee and his backers at city hall. Through coordinated efforts with the New Mexico Department of Transportation, Huckabee, Reverend Abukusumo, and state Senator Tim Jennings cemented plans and secured ten thousand dollars of funding from the state legislature for the highway marker project.¹¹

On a blustery October afternoon in 2002, years of hard work finally came to a satisfying conclusion. A jubilant crowd, comprised of a “diverse cross section of the [Roswell] community,” braved the unusually damp conditions to attend the dedication ceremony. Among the onlookers were a handful of Blackdom’s former residents and their descendants, including Helena Collins and members of the Boyer and Wagoner families. In

⁹ Dusty Huckabee, interview with author, March 13, 2018, Roswell, NM.

¹⁰ Landjur Abukusumo, interview with author, February 7, 2018, Albuquerque, NM.

¹¹ “Historical Marker to be Dedicated Saturday,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, October 25, 2002.

the background, the memorial plaque noted the location of the Blackdom Townsite Plat a few miles to the West and listed Frank and Ella Boyer as the primary contributors to the community's establishment. Bright yellow programs bearing the dictum, "Speaking Truth to Power," were distributed as a letter from Governor Gary Johnson was read aloud, proclaiming October 26, 2002 be designated "Blackdom Day throughout the state of New Mexico."¹² The ceremony was jointly sponsored by the Chaves County NAACP and the recently formed Blackdom Foundation Committee, which had been organized through a blossoming partnership between Reverend Abukusumo and local businessman Justus Bowe.¹³ Although participants found great satisfaction in the day's proceedings, yet another memorial movement was already underway as the joyful occasion reached its conclusion.



Fig. 4.3 Blackdom Townsite historical marker. Highway 285, between Roswell and Artesia. Photo by Claire Stasiewicz.

¹² Ryan Stark, "Blackdom Historical Marker Dedicated During Ceremony," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, October 27, 2002.

¹³ "Blackdom Historical Marker Dedication Program," October 26, 2002, A/C 971024, Box 41, Blackdom Miscellanea, HSSNM.

The Blackdom Foundation Committee (incorporated as a non-profit organization in early 2000) initially sought to erect a statue in downtown Roswell's Pioneer Plaza, honoring the area's African American settlers. When these early forays were met with significant resistance, the committee was forced to seek real estate opportunities elsewhere. Justus Bowe, whose wife is a descendant of the Wagoner family who settled in Blackdom, used his position as a member of the Roswell Economic Development Board to lobby the Roswell city council. Working with the Roswell Department of Parks and Recreation, the committee created a list of potential memorial sites around town. With the highway marker successfully installed and dedicated, the committee's attention turned toward this formidable task.¹⁴

The new memorial concept, which originated with modest plans for a single statue in Pioneer Plaza, began to expand as the project gathered momentum. In September of 2004, after nearly three years of persistent lobbying efforts, the committee received an appropriation of \$100,000 from the state legislature.¹⁵ Days later, the Blackdom Commemorative Committee¹⁶ submitted their proposal for a "New Mexico Heritage Monument and Park" to the city council. The prospectus outlined the vision and mission statement for the complex, along with an overview of potential attractions, including "statuaries depicting the pioneer spirit of Blackdom . . . a museum for exhibits, photographic

¹⁴ Landjur Abukusumo, interview with author, February 26, 2018, Albuquerque, NM.

¹⁵ Shannon Goble, "Blackdom Memorial Site Proposed," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, September 16, 2004.

¹⁶ The Blackdom Commemorative Committee evolved out of the original Blackdom Foundation Committee between 2000 and 2004. This group assumed a variety of interchangeable monikers throughout the duration of the project, including Blackdom Memorial Committee, Blackdom Heritage Committee, Blackdom Heritage and Cultural Committee, and eventually, Blackdom Memorial, Inc. However, the contributing individuals and overarching goals remained essentially the same throughout these nominal shifts. For the sake of clarity, I predominantly use "Blackdom Memorial Committee" to refer to this collective group and their actions, unless otherwise specified by individual documents or reports.

displays and artifacts; an amphitheater for cultural programs, and a café specializing in African American cuisine . . .”¹⁷

The expansion of the project’s scope from statuary garden to memorial complex signaled a shift in the committee’s long-term planning. What began as a purely commemorative and celebratory objective became gradually infused with the more ambitious goal of creating an economic attraction driven by tourist dollars. The National Museum of African American History and Culture was in the early stages of development in Washington, D.C. following its approval by Congress in 2003, but would not open its doors until 2016. Thus, the Blackdom Memorial Committee recognized an opportunity to attract people from across the United States to Roswell through the creation of the first African American cultural center.¹⁸

A few months later, the committee achieved another fundraising success, when “bipartisan efforts of local legislators and Governor Bill Richardson” acquired an additional capital outlay sum of \$125,000 that was earmarked for the Blackdom memorial center, bringing the project’s total allocations to \$225,000. Optimistic pronouncements about the future viability of the memorial were common, and Abukusumo glowingly affirmed, “When we complete this project, it will be first-rate and something for everybody to see . . . What we [the Roswell community] will gain from this one project will be astronomical.” With a

¹⁷ Landjur Abukusumo, “Prospectus: Blackdom New Mexico,” Blackdom Commemorative Committee, September 20, 2004, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection.

¹⁸ Landjur Abukusumo, interview with author, February 26, 2018, Albuquerque, NM.

significant amount of initial funding secured, the committee's focus shifted toward selecting a site and courting potential sponsors and donors from around the nation.¹⁹

Despite this string of positive developments, the venture soon confronted its first serious obstacle. During a city-wide capital outlay meeting in late October, Roswell officials reported that the planning phase of the project was behind schedule. Some blamed bureaucratic missteps, but state Senator Rod Adair cited resistance from corners of the Roswell community. Adair reported, "there seems to be a 'hardened attitude' in the city against proceeding with the Blackdom memorial, and some have said a memorial is not appropriate for Roswell because Blackdom was located outside city limits." One official suggested that Chaves County replace the City of Roswell as the sponsoring government entity behind the project. Although none of the dissenting individuals were named and no explicit references to racial ill will were mentioned by the *Record*, a palpable undercurrent of tension compelled officials to remind those attending the meeting that this would be a "monument for everybody," and that "everybody should honor pioneers."²⁰ Roswell's mayor, Bill Owen, congratulated the involved parties on their efforts to amass funding, but also communicated his concerns about the organization and contents of the proposed memorial, citing widespread confusion among city staffers.²¹

In the aftermath of this rather contentious meeting, a letter published in the *Record* expressed dismay that the memorial project faced such opposition. The author—a former

¹⁹ Christopher Cunningham, "Push Pays Off for Black-Heritage Site," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, April 13, 2005.

²⁰ Christopher Cunningham, "Blackdom Project Delay Irks Legislators," *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, October 29, 2005.

²¹ Ibid.

Roswell resident and “very proud ‘black woman’”—questioned the implications of celebrating the city’s legendary association with extraterrestrial contact while ignoring its local African American heritage:

Why the “powers that be” would fight a \$225,000 monument to honor the lives and commitment of the families of Blackdom, but approve a project dedicated to the aliens that is worth millions, is beyond me. It is more than disturbing because it shows a complete lack of concern for this part of Roswell history. Is it because the work of the African American families of Blackdom is so insignificant that they simply do not count? How sad that . . . an entire town can lose its history to red tape.²²

Nevertheless, the Blackdom Memorial Committee persevered, and just two weeks later, submitted a formal site request to the mayor’s office and city council. The location had been selected from a list of eleven potential options compiled by the Roswell Building and Lands Committee, and consisted of 2.26 acres in central Roswell, between the Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art and the Wool Bowl stadium.²³ The *Record* also circulated an editorial extending the publication’s “wholehearted support” for the project in the days leading up to the council’s final decision.²⁴

After a brief period of deliberation, the committee’s request was officially approved by a unanimous vote of the Roswell city council on February 10, 2006, with various city officials commenting on the historic nature of the heady proceedings.²⁵ Bolstered by this breakthrough, Abukusumo and his fellow committee members began to explore more

²² Felicia Thompson, “Don’t Fight Blackdom Memorial,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, January 17, 2006.

²³ Landjur Abukusumo, letter to Roswell mayor’s office and Roswell city council, February 2, 2006, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection; Mike Bush, “City to Consider Panel’s Recommendation for Blackdom Site,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, February 8, 2006.

²⁴ “A Memorial to Pioneers,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, February 8, 2006.

²⁵ “Council Grants Raise,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, February 10, 2006.

ambitious plans for the memorial site, including options for “an import shop, memorial wall, sculpture-filled dance court, and the schoolhouse from the original [Blackdom] site.”²⁶

With funding secured and a location finally selected, the members of Blackdom Memorial, Inc. spent much of the following three years discussing strategy for the next steps in the project’s development. By August of 2007, the Board of Directors had expanded to eleven people and an architectural firm was hired to create preliminary designs for the newly renamed Blackdom Memorial Gardens Complex. Gregory Waits, of Praxis Architectural Associates in Santa Fe, was chosen as the lead designer for the project. When Waits transitioned from Praxis to a new position at Lloyd & Associates Architects (also in Santa Fe), he brought the project along with him.²⁷

On May 19, 2009, Waits submitted his design proposal for Phase 1 of the Blackdom Memorial Gardens. Although phases 2-4, which included the museum, archival center, and annex (multi-use space) were discussed in the “Phasing Concept Plan,” those aspects were never fully designed. The thick, spiral-bound manuscript briefly contextualized Blackdom’s history, outlined the scope and functionality of the proposed design, and highlighted a selection of the firm’s previous work.²⁸ The Memorial Gardens designs were organized around the “four migrations” that are often viewed as watershed moments in African American history: the “middle passage” formed by captivity and extraction from Africa; the formal institutionalization of slavery in the South; the Exoduster movement and Great

²⁶ “Triangular Lot to Commemorate 1920s Community,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, November 17, 2006.

²⁷ “Planning Meeting: Agenda,” Blackdom Memorial, Inc., August 9, 2007, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection.

²⁸ Gregory Waits, “Blackdom Memorial Gardens: Phase 1,” Lloyd & Associates Architects, May 19, 2009, RFP-09-008, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection.

Migration following the abolition of slavery; and ultimately the post-World War II period of black experiences with segregation and civil rights activism. Waits then superimposed these four distinct sections over the blueprint of the Blackdom Townsite Plat, using barriers to represent the omnipresent effects of the color line. Interspersed water features and modern architecture were intended to create tension between “natural” and “ordered landscapes,” while simultaneously evoking the tenuous balance between environmental bounty and human consumption that plagued Blackdom.²⁹



Fig. 4.4 Gregory Waits, Blackdom Memorial Gardens design, Southeast perspective, Lloyd & Associates Architects, May 19, 2009, RFP-09-008, Rodney Bowe Personal Collection, Albuquerque, NM.

As 2009 drew to a close, the tremors of the Great Recession reached New Mexico. The state legislature, desperate to reduce non-essential spending in the face of drastic austerity measures, saw protracted capital outlay appropriations as a swift and relatively painless option for budget slashing. After all, these coffers contained money set aside for

²⁹ Ibid., 4-6.

public use, but that had not yet been distributed to the communities and projects for which the funds were originally earmarked. SB 182, sponsored by state Senator Carlos Cisneros of Questa, proposed over sixty pages of dispensable line items. In sum, the bill listed 2,596 outstanding capital outlay projects worth over \$181 million that could be removed from the books, their funds diverted to more pressing sectors of the state budget. Page 58 contained three separate entries associated with funding for the Blackdom Memorial Gardens project. When SB 182 was signed into law by Governor Richardson on March 10, 2010, nearly a decade of toil was undone with the stroke of a pen.³⁰

The vision shared by Reverend Abukusumo, Justus Bowe, and many others who contributed to the Blackdom Memorial Committee through the years suffered a sudden, heart-rending collapse. A few individuals—particularly Abukusumo—carried on, soliciting private donations and establishing an annual breakfast fundraiser that celebrated the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Without governmental support and the substantial amount of seed money, however, there was little hope for recovery. When it became clear that the financial crisis was no momentary setback, interest in the project waned on all fronts. Reverend Abukusumo, having finally consigned those disillusion to the past, returned to Albuquerque a few years later.³¹

³⁰ Capital Outlay Reversions for Solvency, SFC/SB182, Chapter 105 (2010); Sherry Robinson, “Vital Aid Here, Wasteful Pork There,” *Roswell (NM) Daily Record*, February 2, 2010.

³¹ Landjur Abukusumo, interview with author, February 26, 2018, Albuquerque, NM.



Fig. 4.5 Blackdom homestead cellar, now filled with scrap wood. Photo by Claire Stasiewicz.

Thus, the story of Blackdom comes full circle. The resources that sustained ambitious visions of both the community and memorial abruptly vanished. A community once bursting with opportunity was reduced to rubble. Where an Exoduster's modest home once stood, a massive heap of discarded railroad ties and shattered fragments of electrical poles disrupts the flat monotony of the prairie, reeking of oily creosote. Likewise, the land reserved for the memorial complex remains vacant, inundated with weeds and windblown trash—another forlorn testament to failure and bitter disappointment suffered at the hands of inexorable forces. Through physical obliteration and absence, the history of Blackdom remains hidden. Blackdom persists only as an idea preserved on the stained and tattered Townsite certificate,

and as scattered memories within the accounts of individuals who once called Blackdom their home. But weary travelers who exit the shimmering blacktop of Highway 285 and linger beyond the shade of the rusting picnic structures will find themselves rewarded with a fleeting tale of the remarkable community of Blackdom that once prospered in the hazy distance.

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