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## Article Title: Nemaha County's African American Community

Full Citation: Patrick Kennedy, "Nemaha County's African American Community," *Nebraska History* 82 (2001): 11-25.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH2001Nemaha.pdf>

Date: 9/15/2010

Article Summary: The story of Nemaha County's African American community involved a relatively small number of people over a relatively short span of time. However, the experiences of these early black settlers raise questions whose answers may illustrate the broader African American experience in Nebraska. These questions concern the significance of small, one generational settlements as well as other patterns of African American settlement, such as those centered on the farmstead or the small community settled around employment (like the railroad). Other questions involve the interaction between blacks and whites, black social status, and racism in the press as well as the communities at large.

Additional Articles which follow the main article above: *The Greene Family*, pages 22-23; *Archeology and the search for African American Pioneer Sites in Southeastern Nebraska*, pages 24-25.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Harriette F Greene, Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, Richard Brown, George Nixon, Matthew Dawsett, Henry Brown, Emily Brown, Albert Brown, Retta Johnson, Luther Hoadley, Mary Hoadley, Laura Johnson, Rosa Payne, Robert W Furnas, Rosa Harper, Benton Aldrich, Martha Jane Harshman, J Sterling Morton, Thomas Greene, Leila Lee Greene, Mary Alice Greene, Leina Aldrich, Martha Jane Aldrich, Lewis Martin, Esther Martin, Stafford family, Austin family, Miller family, Isom family, Suggs family, Elizabeth Cloyd, Anthony Cloyd, Nannie Cloyd, Almeda Greene, James Thompson, Frank Walker, Henry Brown, Albert Brown, Albert Grace, Wesley Porch, Ida Price, James Butts, John Price, Delia Pentecost, Lelia Greene, Joseph Burden, Daniel Walker, Sarah Porch, Charles Neidhart, Arthur Earl, Mary Harper, Gertrude Cloyd, Arthur Earl, Emily Brown, Charles Schantz, Ellen Rebecca Johnston, L L Coryell Sr, Rose Carson, John Carson, Gertrude Cloyd-Brown, Jonas L Brandeis, Edward McComas, Hugh Stoddard, Glenn Noble; Ruth Wensien, Adolph Wensien, W C Den

Place Names: Brownville, Nebraska; Nashville, Tennessee; Nemaha County, Nebraska; Nicodemus, Kansas; Missouri River; Plattsmouth, Nebraska; Mississippi; Louisiana; East Plattsmouth, Iowa; Nebraska City, Nebraska; Council Bluffs, Iowa; Virginia; North Carolina; Georgia; Missouri; Kentucky; Clifton, Nebraska; Auburn, Nebraska; New Hampshire; Wisconsin; California; Topeka, Kansas; Phelps City, Missouri

Keywords: *Omaha World Herald*; Civil War; Reconstruction; Compromise of 1877; Black Codes; African American rights; First Great Exodus; Kansas Fever Exodus of 1879; Democratic-Republican Party; *Omaha Bee*; German Baptists; *Nebraska Herald*; *Nebraska Herald* [Plattsmouth]; *Council Bluffs Globe*; yellow fever; *Omaha Daily republican*; Clifton Cemetery; Clifton Library Association; Quaker; Universalist; Brownville, Fort Kearney and Pacific Railroad; Panic of 1873; Nemaha County marriage records; *History of Nebraska*; Christian Church; American Baptist Home Mission Society of New York; African Methodist Episcopal Church; Walnut Grove Cemetery; *Granger*; prohibition; *Negroes of Nebraska*; 1997 Nebraska State Historical Society Public Archaeology Dig; 1885 census; U S Colored Troops; Grand Army of the Republic

Photographs / Images: Almeda Greene around 1900; Thomas, Leila Lee, Harriette, and Mary Alice Greene about 1900; Martha Jane Aldrich; Benton Aldrich; Racially-mixed church group; Brownville residents boarding a ferry 1890; Brownville school children; Lone Tree Saloon, Brownville, 1890s; Gertrude (Cloyd) Brown; Brownville Methodist Church 1910; Benton Aldrich residence, 1903; Excavation Unit 2 held the ruins of the 1880s house lived in by African American settlers; Patrick Kennedy and Omaha Benson High School students at the 1997 Aldrich Site archeology project

# Nemaha County's African American Community

By Patrick Kennedy

"Brownville's only Negro Won't Rebuild," announced the *Omaha World-Herald* on November 16, 1968. A feature story in the Metro section reported that fire had consumed the home of the town's last black resident and briefly highlighted Harriette F. Greene's life: her birth in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1877, her family's chance migration to Nebraska in 1880, and her recollection of people and events during the eighty-eight years she lived in the community. Greene's death a year later drew little more than an obituary notice in the county newspaper, but it marked the end of a minor, yet poignant story in Nebraska history. It is the story of African American political and economic refugees who fled the South shortly after the close of Reconstruction. They sought land, education for their children, and security. Some families found all three in Nemaha County, Nebraska.<sup>1</sup>

African American migration from the South was closely tied to the evolution of economic, social, and political conditions following the Civil War. During the first years of Reconstruction, blacks had hope for a better life in the South, so there was little impetus to leave. The Compromise of 1877 officially closed Reconstruction, and as federal troops were withdrawn, the white-dominated state Democratic parties "redeemed" each state. State legislatures enacted Black Codes severely limiting African Americans' rights, night riders enforced segregation by means of terror, and the

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**Almeda Greene on Main Street in Brownville, probably around 1900.** Dorothy Broady Collection, Brownville Historical Society

legislatures refused to maintain schools in predominantly black rural areas.<sup>2</sup>

The First Great Exodus began in the 1870s, the result of disillusionment with conditions in the South, and in response to advertising circulars distributed by western land companies and railroads.

This movement was characterized by the organized effort to establish black colonies in the West. The emigrants were those with resources to pay for the trip, file a claim, and become established. The most famous of the colony organizers was Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, and Nicodemus, Kansas, is the best known of the settlements established.<sup>3</sup>

The Kansas Fever Exodus of 1879 was a migration of people primarily from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. This migration stemmed from fears of political terrorism in the South and a widespread belief that the federal government would provide free transportation, land, supplies, and subsistence for blacks who wished to go to Kansas. It differed from the planned, organized colonization efforts in that it was leaderless, largely spontaneous, and the people were virtually all illiterate and impoverished.<sup>4</sup>

The migration of the Kansas Fever Exodusters evoked spirited reporting and self-righteous commentary, generally along Democratic-Republican party lines, from the Nebraska newspapers along the Missouri River. The fear of yellow fever, which had reached epidemic proportions in Memphis, formed a backdrop to the drama. In April 1879 the *Omaha Bee* published on the front page an appeal by St. Louis ministers for money and clothing. Page two noted the arrival in Kansas of "well-off" German Baptists from Pennsylvania. "This class of immigrants will form an offset to the impecunious colored immigrants from Mississippi and Louisiana."<sup>5</sup>

Plattsmouth turned away a group of blacks estimated at 163 persons, who

had been transported by rail to East Plattsmouth, Iowa. The *Nebraska Herald* of Plattsmouth described the immigrants as “clean, healthy looking people . . . in the prime of life and able to work.” The paper interviewed several adults and related sympathetically the situation in the South that led to the Exodus. Later, the town took up a collection to send the migrants to Nebraska City and other unspecified places where “it was reported they were needed and could be used.” The *Herald* later denounced those who charged that Plattsmouth had simply shipped the blacks to Nebraska City, and reproved the community for overreaction to their arrival “simply because it threatened temporarily to force a readjustment of our labor forces.”<sup>6</sup>

On May 10 the *Nebraska City News* reported a “terrible big scare” that 450 “darkies” had passed Brownville and were on their way to Nebraska City. A week later the paper reprinted a piece from the *Council Bluffs Globe* stating that “the general wish is that the darkies and the yellow fever remain where they are.” On August 16 the *News* featured a headline, “More Coons for Kansas.” Another item on page three wondered whether black children would be allowed in the public schools.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the *Omaha Daily Republican* in July and August supported the position taken by Plattsmouth. The *Republican* stated that Nebraska City offered more job opportunities and an established black community that would assist the resettlement. The *Republican* insisted, “They are the best class of immigrants that Nebraska can draw from, and they can be secured for far less money than it costs to get white immigrants who are no better.” In August the paper suggested that the settlement of ten thousand to fifteen thousand blacks in Nebraska might result in a fourth congressional seat.<sup>8</sup>

African Americans were present in Brownville, Nemaha County, from the community’s beginnings in 1854. Town founder Richard Brown brought at least one slave with him from Missouri. George

Nixon, register of the federal land office, was also a slaveholder. Both returned to the South at the outbreak of the Civil War, presumably with their slaves.<sup>9</sup>

Although the 1860 census does not enumerate any blacks living in Brownville, an 1864 photograph features several black men grouped around two wagons on Main Street. They may have been transients who worked along the river during the shipping season or employees of the steamboats that docked at Brownville.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1870 census for Nemaha County, three young black families and a single female are enumerated in Brownville. The oldest of the seven adults was twenty-three and the youngest was twenty-one. A nine-year-old boy was the only child. All the men were laborers, and all the women were employed as housekeepers, cooks, or washerwomen. Mathew Dawsett, a hod carrier, listed four hundred dollars worth of real estate, which may indicate home ownership. Three of the adults were born in Virginia, one in North Carolina, one in Georgia, and two in Missouri. These families are not listed in the 1880 census. Why they settled in Brownville and why they left is unknown. Perhaps the economic decline of the community, which began as early as 1873, was one reason.<sup>11</sup>

The 1880 census reveals that Brownville’s black population had increased by one during the 1870s, and had changed in composition. A single family, that of Henry Brown, and four female servants, were enumerated. Thirty-year-old Henry Brown lived on Water (later College) Street, and a year later purchased a house near the river. He and his wife, Emily, twenty-five, had two girls and a boy ranging in age from four to eight. Eight-year-old Albert was enrolled in school. Both parents stated they could read, but not write. Brown had been born in Missouri and his wife in Kentucky. The children all were born in Nebraska, indicating that the family had been in the state at least since 1872.<sup>12</sup>

Three of the four servant girls were

born in Missouri, as were their parents. Retta Johnson, age twenty, worked for Luther and Mary Hoadley. Laura Johnson, nineteen, described herself as a domestic servant, but also reported ten months unemployment during the previous year. It is not clear whether she was unemployed in Brownville, or had moved there to find work. Fourteen-year-old Rosa Payne was a servant in the home of former Nebraska Governor Robert W. Furnas. Rosa Harper, thirty, born in Mississippi, worked for Edward McComas and was probably a sister to Robert Harper, head of a black family living in rural Nemaha County. Both Johnsons were absent from the 1885 state census of Brownville, but Payne and Rosa Harper were enumerated again.<sup>13</sup>

The spring of 1880 brought a significant increase in the black population of Nemaha County, some of which can be traced, at least indirectly, to the Kansas Fever Exodus of 1879. The migration of African American farm laborers to the county was due primarily to the efforts of Benton Aldrich, a leading farmer of the Clifton community eight miles northwest of Auburn, the future county seat. Aldrich, a native of New Hampshire, had married Martha Jane Harshman in Wisconsin in 1850. Later the couple moved to Minnesota, and in 1865, settled in Nemaha County. Although an ardent abolitionist in his youth, Aldrich, a Quaker or Universalist, refused to fight in the Civil War for religious reasons. He served as postmaster of the Clifton area, established the Clifton Cemetery, and organized the Clifton Library Association, which held more than seven hundred volumes. Aldrich also was a well-known horticulturalist and corresponded with Robert W. Furnas and J. Sterling Morton.<sup>14</sup>

Hugh Stoddard, Aldrich’s grandson, related the story of his assistance to black families:

Later in Nebraska when he learned of some blacks needing employment, he and his neighbors journeyed to Topeka, Kansas, and provided many with homes on his land. In 1880 he had two black men,

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(L. to R.): Thomas, Leila Lee, Harriette, and Mary Alice Greene at their home in Brownville, about 1900. Great Plains Black Museum

a boy and a woman all working for him. Among them was a widow, Almeda Green, and her three children. Aldrich built a dugout for the others, but Mrs. Green lived in the dugout [the Aldrich home] as one of the family, helping with the household work. Later she moved to Brownville and the two families were friends as long as she lived.<sup>15</sup>

Aldrich's attitudes are revealed in an undated letter: "They [the blacks] are an inferior race and must have friends among the more able of the whites or the low whites will run over them."<sup>16</sup>

Today these paternalistic views would be considered racist. In Aldrich's day, however, few whites, even those sympathetic to their plight, would have considered blacks intellectual or cultural equals. While Aldrich certainly had his own self-interest in mind when arranging for the black families to come to Nemaha County to work on his farm, he probably thought himself a humanitarian. Although his views do not meet today's standards, they were above the cultural norm of his time and place.

A Federal Writers Project publication, *The Negroes of Nebraska* (1940), characterized the reception of blacks in the rural areas of Nebraska as follows: "In the rural areas, . . . they were in most cases tolerated though not often encouraged."<sup>17</sup> This statement seems to reflect the tone of an editorial comment that appeared in the Republican *Sheridan Post* regarding Aldrich's efforts:

The exodus wave struck Sheridan [now Auburn] Thursday, ten of the supposed seed of Ham having passed this way enroute to Mr. Aldrich's a resident of Washington Precinct. We understand a number of Negro families have been employed for the season by farmers near Clifton. It may be [good] policy from a business standpoint to employ labor of this kind, but when we look at the matter from a social standpoint it seems to throw a different light upon the matter. Still, for all this, colored people have been thrown upon our mercy, and homes must be provided for them.<sup>18</sup>

The *Nemaha County Granger* reprinted the statement from the *Post* and responded:

Is it possible that the editor of the *Post* is not willing to accept the negro as his social equal? Why, then, does he with his party, attempt to force the people of the South to do what he, and none of his party associates are willing to do? Is the negro in Nebraska in any way inferior, socially, to the same negro when in Louisiana or South Carolina? What is the trouble with the negro, from a social standpoint? Please explain.<sup>19</sup>

Benton Aldrich's correspondence and farm daybooks provide a glimpse of the black families' daily lives, relationships, and subsistence activities. His daughter, Nella, wrote to her grandmother on July 13, 1880:

We have two colored men one boy and a woman working for us this summer. The woman does most of the housework but would rather work out of doors if needed. Did you ever hear a lot of colored people sing. It is so different from anything I ever heard before. Men and women all sing the air commencing softly and increasing until they reach the top of their voices slurring every word out to its longest possible length. One of the older men give [sic] out the words line by line from memory for they cannot read. They are

very fond of music and will sing for hours at a time on Sundays or after their work is done at night.<sup>20</sup>

Aldrich's granddaughter, Leina, wrote excitedly to her grandmother on December 21, 1880:

We have a little black baby he is eleven months old and is a nice little boy his name is Walter his mamma works for us her name is Almeda[,] Mr. Gilbert has a colored family working for him. . . . Almeda and I walked 7 miles the other day to get our Christmas presents don't you think I did pretty well.

Alfred Henry (the colored boy) and I have been out trying the snow it is about an inch deep.<sup>21</sup>

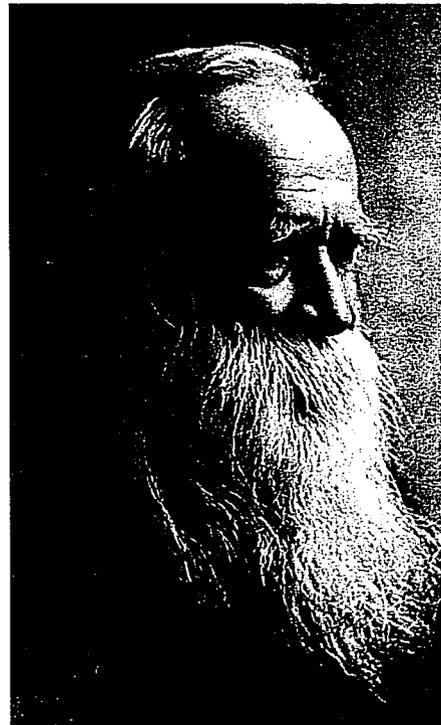
Earlier in the summer, Benton Aldrich wrote his mother, "We have had good success with the colored folks, from present appearances we are not likely to hire more white labor at present."<sup>22</sup>

Several other African American families also lived in western Nemaha County near the Aldrich farm. They included Almeda Greene's parents, Lewis and Esther Martin, and the Austin, Stafford, Miller, Isom, and Suggs families. Other black families were scattered across rural Nemaha County. Several were from Louisiana or Mississippi and may have been part of the Kansas Fever migration. Others were from Tennessee and probably came in the more gradual movement of blacks from the Upper South to the Great Plains in the late 1870s. Most of the black residents worked as farm laborers or domestics.<sup>23</sup>

Aldrich's farm daybooks listed monthly wages for laborers at fifteen dollars, and day wages at ninety cents. In 1888, when many of the blacks were still working on farms but living in Brownville, wages climbed to eighteen dollars per month and a dollar per day. In addition to jobs that paid daily and monthly wages, some were contracted as piecework: Aldrich paid two and one-half cents per tree for hoeing in the orchard, and ten cents per shock for cutting corn. In the one case where the races of the farmhands can be documented, the daybooks indicate that



Martha Jane Aldrich. Ruth (Wensien) Simon/Brownville Historical Society



Benton Aldrich. Ruth (Wensien) Simon/Brownville Historical Society

Aldrich paid his white and black laborers equally.

The daybooks also show that black families earned their living in a variety of ways. They sometimes contracted with white neighbors for field work; women took in laundry; Elizabeth, daughter of Anthony and Nannie Cloyd, was housekeeper for another farmer. Two references suggest that Lewis Martin may have sharecropped a portion of the Aldrich property and perhaps raised a pig of his own. Within a year Martin purchased a house in Brownville. Most of the other rural blacks moved to town within the next five years, and a distinct African American community began to form.<sup>24</sup>

During the 1880s significant changes were occurring in Brownville, Nemaha County, and Nebraska. The state's population more than doubled and the statewide black population rose from 2,385 to 8,913. The percentage of foreign-born residents also increased rapidly. Nemaha County's population increased by 35 percent in the 1870s. Growth slowed during the 1880s, when the county's white population rose by 2,849, a 27.5 percent increase, and the black population, which had risen from eight to eighty-seven in the 1870s, declined slightly to eighty-four by 1890. An 1879 plat map indicates that virtually all the land in the county had been claimed.<sup>25</sup>

Brownville presented a contrast to the economic health of the rest of the county. Although the town had experienced rapid growth in the territorial period as a Missouri River port and the seat of Nemaha County, peak population of 1,309 was reached in 1880. In 1885, after three hotly-contested elections, the county seat was moved to Auburn. By 1890 the Brownville population was 980. This downward trend continued.<sup>26</sup>

The seeds of Brownville's decline were planted with the incorporation of the Brownville, Fort Kearney and Pacific Railroad in 1867. The idea for an east-west railroad had originated in the

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1850s, but the Panic of 1857 and the Civil War thwarted any progress until the late 1860s. By 1870 the county and town had incurred \$278,000 of bonded indebtedness to support construction of a railroad. Although ten miles of track were laid, the Panic of 1873 halted construction. An eight-year court battle ended in 1883 with a ruling that the bonds would have to be paid even though the east-west railroad project had been abandoned. Although a north-south line did reach Brownville, the financial burden incurred in support of the defunct Brownville, Fort Kearney and Pacific brought soaring tax rates, driving homeowners and businesses away. It was into this setting of high taxes, decreasing population, and diminishing opportunities that the black families settled in Brownville.<sup>27</sup>

Harriette Greene, Almeda's daughter, who died in 1969 and was the last descendent of Brownville's early black settlers still living there, is reported to have said on several occasions that as many as twenty African American families, about one hundred people in all, had lived in Brownville, though the historical record supports a smaller number.<sup>28</sup> Federal and state censuses, District 34 (Brownville) school censuses, and county tax and marriage records from 1878 through 1910 show a total of sixteen black households including thirty adults, forty-six children, and four single adults, a total of eighty people. The high point was thirteen households in 1889 and 1890. The records include only those who were enumerated in the census, who owned property, married or had children in the Brownville school.

One of the goals of the Exodus was land ownership, but there is no evidence that these immigrants purchased farmland in Nemaha County. By the time they arrived, virtually no land was available for homesteading, and much of the county had been pastured or farmed for nearly thirty years. The 1880s were generally good years for agriculture in Nebraska, and in 1881 improved



**A racially-mixed group, believed to be from the Brownville Christian Church, prepares for an outing.** Dorothy Broady Collection/Brownville Historical Society

land in Nemaha County was selling for an average of \$5.75 per acre.<sup>29</sup> It seems unlikely that the black families, with meager savings and no collateral, would have been able to compete with established farmers when land came up for sale. It is also evident from Benton Aldrich's journals that farming was becoming an increasingly technical operation, which might have prevented relatively uneducated or inexperienced blacks from attempting it.

All the African American males in Nemaha County in 1880 and 1885 described themselves as laborers, with the exception of James Thompson, who gave his occupation as "farmer," and Frank Walker, whose occupation in 1885 was "Baptist minister." Laborer was used to describe any unskilled manual worker, both agricultural and in town, and the exact description of the work is seldom stated. Henry Brown, his son Albert, and Albert Grace, three of the earliest black immigrants to Nemaha County, settled in Brownville and appear to have made their living there. Brown

worked at the sawmill in 1880 and carried mail to nearby Phelps City, Missouri, in the early 1890s. Grace worked at the livery stable in 1885. Brown's son worked on the railroad in 1910.<sup>30</sup>

Most of the men who had worked as agricultural laborers in 1880 continued to do so during the agricultural season after moving to town. Though they were living in Brownville in 1885, Lewis Martin, James Stafford, Anthony Cloyd, and Wesley Porch were all mentioned in Benton Aldrich's daybooks as late as 1888, the last year for which there is a record. Almeda Greene worked for the Coryell family, neighbors of the Aldriches.<sup>31</sup> All the able-bodied black women worked as domestics, with the exception of Gertrude Cloyd-Brown, who was former governor Robert Furnas's secretary. She listed her occupation in 1900 as "typewriter."<sup>32</sup>

Odd jobs filled times of under- or unemployment, and both men and women worked in season in the orchards that dotted the hills around Brownville. Earnings were supplemented by kitchen

gardens, a strategy shared by the white residents of Brownville.

The properties owned by the Martins, the Cloyds, and the Porches suggest that these families may have attempted small subsistence plots on the “hilly flanks” of the town. The land would have been suitable for gardening, raising chickens, a pig or two, and perhaps a cow. There is evidence that grape horticulture, as encouraged by Governor Furnas, was practiced on these sites, but it is unclear whether the grapes were planted and tended by the black families or by subsequent owners.<sup>33</sup>

The legal marital status of many of the black couples who came to Nemaha County is unknown. Legal marriage was sometimes prohibited for slaves because it complicated the business of buying and selling them as property. Sham marriages were sometimes performed by slaveowners to suit their own purposes.

After emancipation, marital partners joined against their wills sometimes simply walked away from the relationship, which sometimes included children. Other families, separated by sale, searched for lost husbands, wives, or children. Whatever their marital status, couples arrived in Nemaha County as husband and wife, and there is no record of divorce or desertion among the early black settlers.<sup>34</sup>

Nemaha County marriage records reveal only nine marriages between black partners from 1872 to 1915. The small number suggests that other young male and female members of the community may have married after leaving Brownville. One couple, Ida Price and James Butts, were married in the Negro Baptist Church in Brownville. Two others, John Price and Delia Pentecost; Lelia Greene and Joseph Burden, had religious ceremonies performed at

home. The other marriages were performed by the justice of the peace or the county judge.<sup>35</sup>

The Negro Baptist Church was the one documented African American community institution in Brownville. According to *Andreas's History of Nebraska*, which acquired its information primarily from Robert W. Furnas, a black Baptist church was formed in 1882. The nine members were under the leadership of a Rev. Daniel Walker. Although Daniel does not appear, a Baptist minister named Frank Walker is listed in the 1885 census. The record of one marriage performed in 1884 is the only documentary evidence of the church's existence. No articles of incorporation or record of property ownership were filed with the Nemaha County clerk. It is unclear how long this black Baptist congregation functioned.<sup>36</sup>

The black Baptists met in the build-



These Brownville residents are preparing to board the ferry for a picnic, 1890. Dorothy Broady Collection/Brownville Historical Society

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ing formerly used by the white Baptist congregation. The foundation, on the northwest corner of Fourth and Atlantic streets, is all that exists today of the wooden structure, which was destroyed by fire. Property records indicate that this was the original site of the Christian Church building. A tornado damaged the structure in 1866, and the congregation built a new building on Main Street. The white Baptists purchased the property and rebuilt the church. About 1880 the congregation disbanded and sold the property to the American Baptist Home Mission Society of New York, which held it until September 1890. Glenn Noble reported the existence of an African Methodist Episcopal Church located south of Brownville. This church remains undocumented either in records or oral history. Perhaps an A.M.E. congregation met in the homes of its members.<sup>37</sup>

At least two of Brownville's black residents worshipped in white churches. Harriette Greene attended the Episcopal Church until it closed in 1893. She later worshipped at the Methodist Church, as did Sarah Porch.<sup>38</sup> An undated photograph of a racially mixed group of men, women, and children dressed in their "Sunday best," and standing in front of the Christian Church raises the question of whether other African Americans also worshipped in the white churches of Brownville. The Christian Church records for the period were lost in a fire.

Harriette Greene recalled that black social life was "just as enjoyable as anyone else's. We had our dances and picnics. Everybody got along with each other."<sup>39</sup> An 1890 photograph shows whites and blacks about to board a ferry for a picnic across the river. Newspapers of the day made brief references to black social events such as roller skating parties and a Christmas ball:

The colored brothers and sisters are expecting to have a grand ball on Christmas Eve. It is doubtless [*sic*] from casual utterances dropped by the brothers of this event, that certain "white folks" are prognosticating the abdication of da possum and sweet taters about that time.<sup>40</sup>



**Morgan Greene** (fourth row, fourth from left) appears in this group of Brownville scholars. Dorothy Broady Collection/Brownville Historical Society

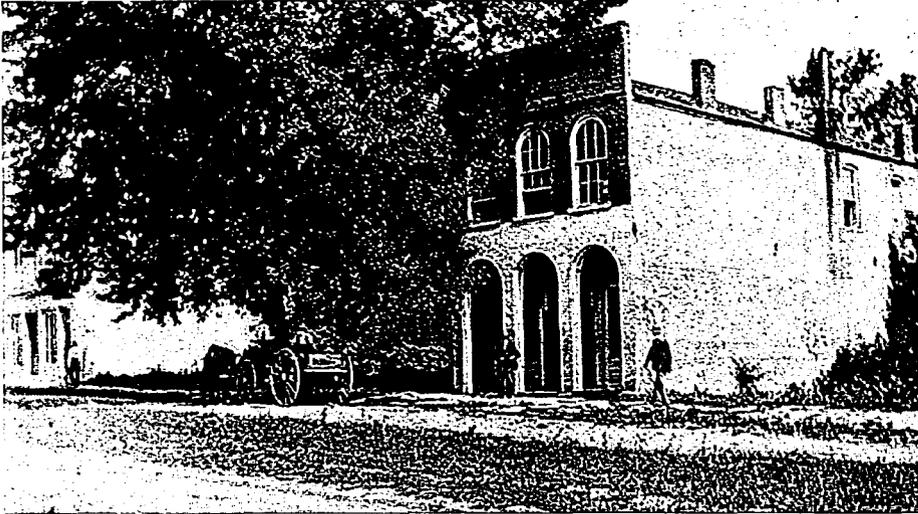
Identification of blacks by race and the use of dialect by the press was standard practice during the post-Civil War period and into the twentieth century. Generally the articles ridicule blacks by the imitation of dialect, the amused belittlement of cultural practices, or by stereotyping. The examples found in the Nemaha County press, while clearly racist, are relatively mild compared with those found in other American papers, including some of the most respectable urban publications.<sup>41</sup>

Clearly race was a factor in the daily lives of Brownville's African Americans, but the color line seems not to have been strictly drawn. Brownville was a rural community and its black families lived throughout the town and were often neighbors to prominent white families. Public school classes were never segregated. It was not until 1883 that racial classifications were recorded in the school census. Interestingly, although

all of the black students were carefully identified in 1883, the identifications became increasingly haphazard in 1884 and 1885. The practice was abandoned thereafter.<sup>42</sup>

Some blacks attended white churches, there was no "colored" section in Walnut Grove Cemetery, and burial records do not indicate race. Economic differentiation is apparent in the fact that only the Martin-Greene family graves are marked. That race was a factor in Brownville life, however, is revealed by two photographs, one of a local theatrical performance and another of a parade, both of which show whites in blackface.<sup>43</sup>

The restriction of children's playmates also may be a manifestation of the color line. Harriette Greene recalled playing with the children of Charles Neidhart, a white monument dealer. She also recalled that white classmates came to the house to meet her sister,



The Lone Tree Saloon (now the Brownville Mill) figured in the prohibition controversies of the 1890s. Dorothy Broady Collection/Brownville Historical Society

Lelia, on the evening of Lelia's graduation from eighth grade. One Brownville resident remembered that she was forbidden to visit the Greene home when she was a child. Another remembered doing odd jobs for Harriette Greene, who always paid in homemade cookies, pies, or biscuits. He recalled checking the pastries to see if any of the pigmentation from her skin remained on them.<sup>44</sup>

A longtime friend of Harriette Greene's stated that she believed Greene felt the existence of an "invisible line" that separated her from white members of Brownville society. The line was exhibited in such behaviors as Greene's deferential attitude, allowing others to enter the post office door before her, and her refusing to eat with the people for whom she worked. The informant related that one could tell if Harriette liked you by whether or not she would eat with you. Arthur Earl reported that in his youth, Harriette Greene, Mary Harper, and Sarah Porch all worked picking fruit and vegetables. None, however, attained inside jobs at the canning factory. These jobs were coveted by area white residents.<sup>45</sup>

Participation in political life may be another indicator of the color line, as suggested by the involvement of black

resident Henry Brown in two political issues, a controversy over prohibition and the mayoral election of 1893. During the 1890s Brownville was the scene of political turmoil over the issue of prohibition. The "Wets" promised that saloons would bring badly needed revenue, thus saving the public school, but the "Drys" countered that the damage inflicted on the town's moral and social fabric would be too great a price to pay. The *Granger* reported on May 12, 1893, that a petition to allow liquor licenses had been filed in Brownville. Twenty-nine men and eight women, including six "colored," had signed the petition. The prohibitionist editor, who pulled no punches in his effort to save the town from "the most merciless foe that has ever attacked or cursed the human race," asked the rhetorical question, "Does it not seem a little strange that women should desire to see their names sandwiched between those of negroes and drunkards?"<sup>46</sup>

Fourteen months earlier, the *Granger* had alluded to a plot by the "Wets" to "have a colored man on the committee [city council] so as to make the colored vote solid." The name of Henry Brown, a longtime member of Brownville's black community, seems to be closely

connected to the controversy between "Wets" and "Dries."<sup>47</sup>

J. H. Dundas's county history describes Brown as "a man not backward about setting up the drinks," which apparently refers to his anti-prohibition stand. Local folklore persists that Brown ran away to California with Gertrude Cloyd, taking the funds of the A.M.E. Church with him. Gertrude Cloyd actually married Brown's son, Albert. Arthur Earl, a longtime member of the Walnut Grove Cemetery Board, stated that he had heard the elder Brown was buried in the cemetery, but there is no record of his burial. The 1900 census enumerated Emily Brown as a widow, and cemetery records indicate that Albert Brown once owned a lot at Walnut Grove, but none of the family is recorded as having been buried there.<sup>48</sup>

A more interesting question concerning Henry Brown is whether he was elected mayor of Brownville in 1893. On April 14 the *Granger* reported:

Henry Brown, a colored gem'mam, was elected mayor of Brownville on the 4th. It is now expected the city will boom. Mr. Brown will no doubt make as good a mayor, if not better, than some we have had in years gone by. The color line cuts no figure so long as the candidate is on the side of those who voted for him.<sup>49</sup>

One week later the *Granger* printed a retraction:

Someone, either wilfully, wantonly, carelessly, maliciously, wickedly, accidentally, or through pure cussedness last week informed the *Granger* that a colored gentleman had been elected mayor of Brownville. To say the least it was a slight mistake, as Mr. Charles Schantz bore off the honors.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the correction, the story of Brown's election appeared in a 1902 history of Nemaha County, and continues to be passed down by some citizens of the county as part of local folklore. It also appeared in the 1940 *Negroes of Nebraska* booklet. A 1989 master's thesis reported a new twist. Brown lost the election of 1893, but won office in the next election. No documentation for this statement has been found.<sup>51</sup>

## Nemaha County's African American Community

Henry Brown seems to have been involved in this political contest, but his role remains unclear. Was he a power or a pawn? Was the electorate so closely divided that the black vote was critically important? Did he actually run for office? Or, as seems likely, was the whole story a hoax? Only eight years had passed since the county seat had been moved to Auburn. Feelings were still running high. The African American residents of Brownville may have been used as a means to ridicule the struggling community.

Blacks and whites in Brownville apparently were able to cross the color line in limited ways. Personal bonds often appear to have been based on long-term, employer-employee relationships, and in addition to helping assure economic survival, may have given blacks a sense of social status, and contributed to their personal security.

Ellen Rebecca Johnston, an unmarried sister of a Brownville banker, was a long-time employer of Almeda Greene. "Miss Ellen" took a personal interest in raising young Harriette. Each Sunday she took Harriette to the Episcopal Church. When Harriette reached the age of twelve, Miss Johnston told her, "Now you know right from wrong, you know enough to take care of yourself." After the Episcopal Church closed in 1893, Harriette Greene worshipped at the Methodist Church, but she always considered herself an Episcopalian.<sup>52</sup>

Johnston died in 1899. In her will she left her house on Main Street, all of her personal possessions, and a cow named Daisy to "my good friend, Almeda [sic] Greene, a colored woman." Almeda Greene died in 1935 owing property taxes that Harriette could not pay. The house was sold at public auction on September 12, 1939. L. L. Coryell, Sr., then a successful Lincoln businessman, drove to Auburn, purchased the house for \$130, and sold it to Harriette for one dollar. Coryell's father had been a neighbor of the Benton Aldriches, and Almeda Greene had worked for the family for years. Harriette Greene lived in

the house until 1968.<sup>53</sup>

Brownville oral history relates that Jefferson Harper, son of former slaves Robert and Mary Harper, was a problem drinker. One informant stated that some white males in town enjoyed enabling



**Gertrude (Cloyd) Brown was secretary to former Governor Robert W. Furnas.**  
Brownville Historical Society

his habit for their own amusement.<sup>54</sup> Rose Carson, daughter of banker John Carson, assisted Harper with employment and housing, possibly out of fondness for his parents. She hired him as caretaker for the Carson house and other Brownville properties after she had moved to Lincoln. She also sold Harper a small house for twenty-five dollars, presumably well below market value.<sup>55</sup>

Gertrude Cloyd-Brown was a young girl when her mother consented to allow her to work at the home of former governor Furnas. She completed her

education and worked for Furnas as his secretary until sometime after 1900. She became the only African American in Brownville to do skilled work. Her name and expression of best wishes appear in the fiftieth wedding anniversary book of Governor and Mrs. Furnas. Hers is the only name of a black person there, and appears alongside those of other well-wishers such as J. Sterling Morton and Jonas L. Brandeis. In perfect penmanship she wrote:

My Dear Friends,

Words fail me to express my happiness of having the opportunity to congratulate you on the event of your golden wedding. May your remaining days be many and your pathway strewn with blessings and good deeds, as you have done for others, is the wish of

Your true friend  
Gertrude Cloyd<sup>56</sup>

The story of Nemaha County's African American community is in many respects a minor episode in Nebraska history. It involved a relatively small number of people and a relatively brief span of time. Furthermore, this community made no discernable effect on the history of Nemaha County, Brownville, or the state. The experiences of these early black settlers, however, raise questions whose answers may illustrate the broader African American experience in Nebraska.

One important question concerns the significance of small, one generational settlements such as those in Nemaha County. African American settlement in Nebraska is generally considered an urban phenomenon, focused in Omaha and Lincoln. However, two other African American settlement patterns developed across the state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The first was the farmstead, largely effected by federal land legislation. The second was the small community, usually associated with employment opportunities connected to military posts, railroads, or the Missouri River. Both patterns were highly transitory, usually lasting only one generation. The reasons

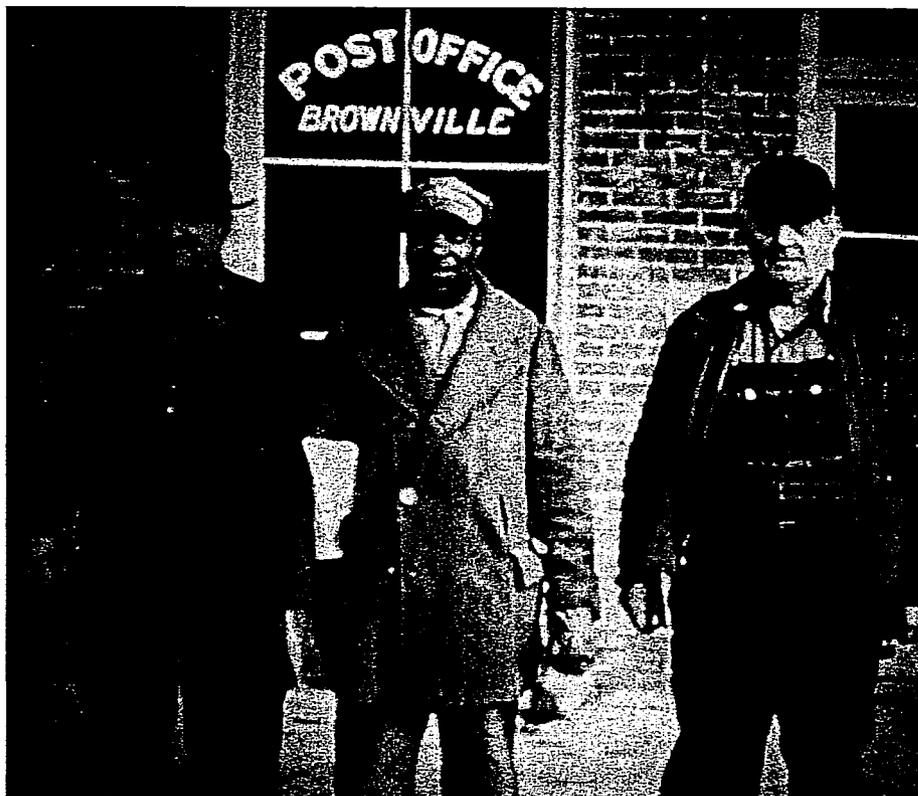
for the demise of these settlements is clear in outline: undercapitalization of the farmsteads, the decline of job opportunities on the railroads and the river, or the closing of military installations. The general movement to the city by the younger generation, who sought different goals than those of their parents, was a characteristic of both black and white Americans in this period. For young blacks, the only road to upward mobility was in communities large enough to support a black class structure.

Rural black communities have generally been regarded as insignificant "way stops" on the road from the post-plantation South to the urban North. In Nemaha County, some families found land, education for their children, and personal security. Additionally the children acquired the social skills to live successfully amid a white majority. What they did not find, was a community large enough to sustain them economically.

A second question concerns the interaction between blacks and whites. In Nemaha County, it was the outgrowth of subsistence relationships. These relationships between blacks and whites were critical to black survival in this economically depressed community. These relationships may also have determined black social status and contributed to their sense of security. Can this pattern be discerned in other small communities and rural settings having both black and white residents?

A final question concerns racism. In Nemaha County, racism can be discerned both in the newspaper reporting of the times, and in the behaviors of individuals. Racism was a fact of daily life for African Americans in the community. But it did not drive them away. It appears that the presence of nonviolent racism was less a determinant to long-term settlement than were home ownership and jobs for the first generation, and the availability of prospective marriage partners for the second.

A thorough historical survey of African Americans in Nebraska has yet to be



Thomas Greene (center) with two unidentified men in front of the Brownville post office. Great Plains Black Museum

written. This study of one community may contribute to that effort. Indeed, a general history cannot be written until studies of individual communities can be completed. Only when that data has been acquired and interpreted can researchers adequately describe and interpret the broader African American experience in Nebraska.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Brownville's Only Negro Won't Rebuild," *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 16, 1968. See also *Lincoln Evening Journal*, Nov. 16, 1968. Harriette Greene's obituary is from the *Auburn Press-Tribune*, Dec. 16, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of Reconstruction's aftermath, see Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Painter, see also Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-1880* (Lawrence: The Regents Press

of Kansas, 1978), 78, and Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, "The Settlement of Nicodemus: Its Origins and Early Promotion," in Gregory D. Kendrick, ed., *Promised Land on the Solomon: Black Settlement at Nicodemus, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, n.d.), 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Painter, *Exodusters*, 188-89.

<sup>5</sup> *Omaha Bee*, Apr. 3, 1879.

<sup>6</sup> *Nebraska Herald* (Plattsmouth), July 17, 24; Aug. 7, 1879.

<sup>7</sup> *Nebraska City News*, Apr. 26; May 10, 17, 31; July 26; Aug. 16, 30, 1879.

<sup>8</sup> *Omaha Daily Republican*, July 20, 22, 23; Aug. 8, 1879.

<sup>9</sup> Hubert Garrett, "A History of Brownville, Nebraska" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1927), 27-28.

<sup>10</sup> The photograph is in the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS), Lincoln.

<sup>11</sup> 1870 Census of Population, Brownville, Nemaha County, Nebraska, 28-29 (all census records cited are on microfilm at NSHS); Barton Clevenger, "Epochs of Early Nemaha County

## Nemaha County's African American Community

History" (1952), unpublished ms. at the Nemaha Valley Museum, Auburn, Nebraska, 32; Garrett, "History of Brownville," 123.

<sup>12</sup> 1880 Census of Population, Nemaha County, Nebraska, ED 207:10, NSHS; Nemaha County Deed Record 14:129, Nemaha County Clerk's Office, Auburn, Nebraska.

<sup>13</sup> 1880 census, ED 207: 8, 18, 35; 1885 State Census of Nebraska, ED 540: 6, 7.

<sup>14</sup> John William Irwin, "Benton Aldrich and the Clifton Farmers' Library" (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, 1972), 26–27.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 43–44.

<sup>16</sup> Box 1, Benton Aldrich Papers, MS3264, NSHS.

<sup>17</sup> Federal Writers Project, *The Negroes of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Woodruff Printing Co., 1940), 10.

<sup>18</sup> Reprinted in the *Nemaha County Granger* (Auburn), Apr. 30, 1880. The pertinent issue of the *Sheridan Post* is not available. *The Negroes of Nebraska* booklet omits the last sentence from the quotation, which considerably alters the meaning. See also John H. Dundas, *A Granger History of Nemaha County* (Auburn: The Nemaha County Granger, 1902), 114. Sheridan was platted in 1869. A nearby townsite named Calvert was laid out when a railroad arrived in 1881. After the county seat was moved from Brownville in 1885 and the courthouse built on land midway between the two towns, they incorporated under the name Auburn.

<sup>19</sup> *Nemaha County Granger*, Apr. 30, 1880.

<sup>20</sup> Aldrich Papers, S. 1, F.3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, farm daybooks, 1881, 1888, S. 5, F. 1; 1880 census, Nemaha County, ED 203:6; and 1880 census of Nemaha County, various enumeration districts.

<sup>24</sup> Author's analysis based on the 1885 Nebraska State Census, School District 34 Census (Brownville), and property records.

<sup>25</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Compendium of the Eleventh Census, 1890, Population* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1892), 497; Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population, 1790–1915* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1918), 820; 1879 plat map at Nemaha Valley Museum, Auburn, n.p.

<sup>26</sup> *Nebraska Blue Book, 1992–93* (Lincoln: Clerk of the Legislature, 1993), 877.

<sup>27</sup> James J. Blake, "The Brownville, Fort Kearney and Pacific Railroad," *Nebraska History* 29 (Sept. 1948): 238–72; Brown, *The Brownville Story*, 108.

<sup>28</sup> Bertha Calloway, Omaha, Nebraska, interviews by author, 1989–92; Arthur Earl, Brownville, Nebraska, interviews by author, 1989–92.

<sup>29</sup> A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: The Western Historical Co., 1882), 1140.

<sup>30</sup> 1880 census, Nemaha County, ED 207:10; 1885 state census, Nemaha County, ED 540: 5; 1910 census, Nemaha County, ED 112: 1B.

<sup>31</sup> Farm daybooks, 1888, Aldrich Collection; Earl interviews.

<sup>32</sup> 1900 census, Nemaha County, ED 89: 1.

<sup>33</sup> Earl interviews; Harold Davis, Brownville, Nebraska, interviews by author, 1989–93.

<sup>34</sup> On slave marriages, see Leon Litwack, *Been in the Sun Too Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 241–44.

<sup>35</sup> Marriage Registers 3:420, 4:62, 4:84, 4:143, 4:425, 5:277, 7:297, Nemaha County Clerk's office, Auburn, Nebraska.

<sup>36</sup> Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, 1144; "Brownville's Only Negro Won't Rebuild"; Cleavenger, "Epochs," 41; Marriage Register 3:420. Frank Walker, an African American born in Virginia, is listed as a laborer in the 1880 census of Nemaha City Precinct, ED 210:3. Frank Walker, born in Virginia but listed as white, appears in the 1885 state census of the same precinct with his occupation given as "Baptist Minister," ED 541:2.

<sup>37</sup> Deed Record Books 9:158 and 160, 16:97, 22:144; Earl interviews; Glenn Noble, *Flashes from the Story of Colorful Old Brownville* [Brownville

Historical Society, 1959], 18–19.

<sup>38</sup> Harriette Greene, Brownville, Nebraska, interview by Adolph and Ruth Wensien, n.d. [1960s?]; Earl interviews.

<sup>39</sup> "Brownville's Only Negro Won't Rebuild."

<sup>40</sup> *Nemaha County Granger*, Dec. 4, 1891.

<sup>41</sup> Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro* (New York: Collier Books, 1969), 185–218.

<sup>42</sup> School Census, District 34, 1877–1895, Nemaha County Superintendent's Office, Auburn, Nebraska.

<sup>43</sup> *Burial Record Book and Map, 1884–present*, Walnut Grove Cemetery Association, Brownville; photograph collection, Brownville Historical Society.

<sup>44</sup> Greene interview; anonymous, interviews by author, 1990.

<sup>45</sup> Ruth (Wensien) Simon, Auburn, Nebraska, interview by author, 1991; Earl interviews.

<sup>46</sup> *Nemaha County Granger*, May 12, 1893.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, Mar. 25, 1892.

<sup>48</sup> *Burial Record Book and Map, 1884–Present*.

<sup>49</sup> *Nemaha County Granger*, Apr. 14, 1893.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 21, 1893. See also *Nemaha County Herald*, Apr. 28, 1893.

<sup>51</sup> *Negroes of Nebraska*, 28; James Bish, "The Black Experience in Selected Nebraska Counties, 1854–1920" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1989), 146.

<sup>52</sup> "Brownville's Only Negro Won't Rebuild"; Greene interview; Earl interviews, Simon interview.

<sup>53</sup> Deed Record Book, 61:57, 256; Earl interviews; Simon interviews; Mrs. Robert Smith, Nemaha County, interview by author, 1998.

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous informant, Brownville, interview by author, 1998.

<sup>55</sup> Deed Record Book 52:180.

<sup>56</sup> Robert W. Furnas Wedding Anniversary Book, 1905, Brownville Historical Society.

## The Greene Family

After living briefly at the Benton Aldrich farmstead in rural Nemaha County, the Greene family arrived in Brownville in 1881. The family consisted of the grandparents, Lewis and Esther Martin, Almeda Greene and her two children Harriette and Walter, and Henry Mitchell. The 1885 State Census indicates that the Martins and Greenes lived in adjacent dwellings on Eighth Street, "two doors west of the cemetery."<sup>1</sup>

Little is known about the Martins. Lewis was a private in Company F, Seventeenth U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War. According to Harriette Greene, he worked as a laborer in town and out in the county. Esther Martin performed domestic work for Brownville families. Both Lewis and Esther died in the 1880s. His grave in the Brownville Cemetery is marked with the Grand Army of the Republic emblem. A blank stone immediately to the north is believed to mark Esther's grave.<sup>2</sup>

Almeda Greene, Harriette's mother, was born into slavery near Nashville, Tennessee, in 1847 or 1848. She was owned by a family named Jacko. Her father, however, was owned by a nearby planter who sold him, but he continually ran away from his new owner to be near his family. The family was reunited after the Civil War and stayed in the Nashville area until the Kansas Fever exodus of 1879.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1880 census, Almeda Greene is recorded as married, but her husband is not enumerated. With her was Walter Greene, born in 1879, and ten-year-old Henry Mitchell, whose biological relationship to Almeda is unknown. Harriette, who would have been about three years old in 1880, does not appear in the census.<sup>4</sup>

The 1885 state census of Brownville recorded three children in Almeda Greene's household, Henry (possibly Henry Mitchell), Harriette, and Walter, and the census recorded

Almeda as a widow. Henry Mitchell died that year and is buried in the Brownville cemetery next to Lewis and Esther Martin.<sup>5</sup>

Almeda was to have three more children, though she never remarried. Those children, like most young people in Brownville, both black and white, moved to larger and more prosperous communities in search of economic opportunity and a larger pool of potential marriage partners. Thomas Greene (1885-1956) and wife Mildred (1888-1957) lived and worked in Auburn and are buried in the family plot at Brownville. Mary Alice Greene (1890-1970) married Samuel Stewart and moved to Omaha. She is buried next to Harriette in Brownville. Leila Lee, the youngest of Almeda's children, was born in 1893. She married Joseph Burden of Lincoln, where the couple resided for the rest of their lives.<sup>6</sup>

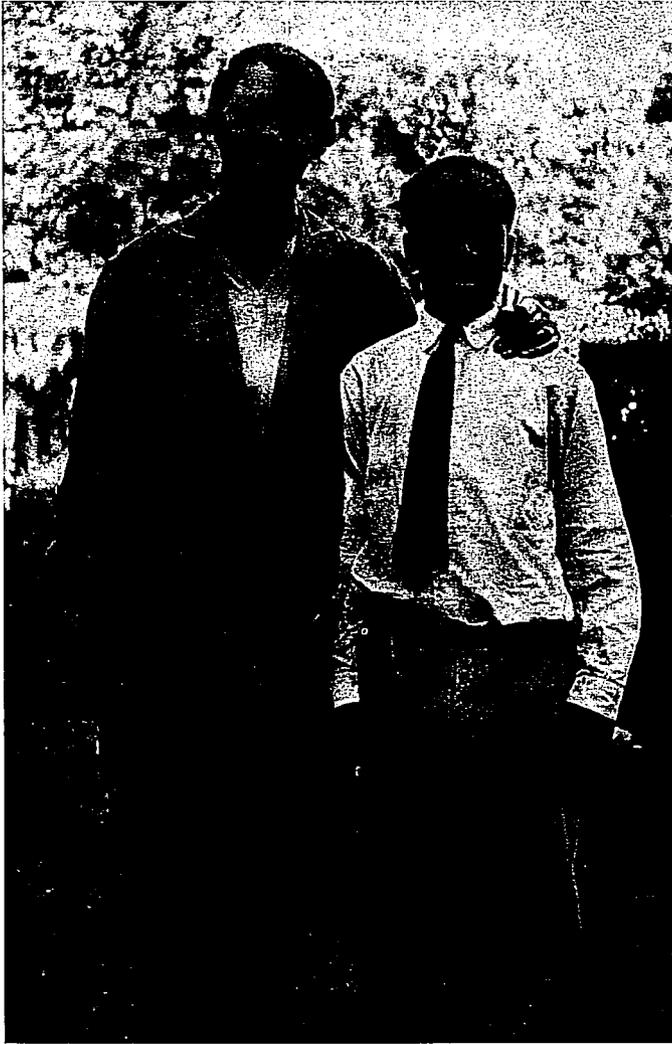
An interview with Harriette Greene recorded by Adolph and Ruth Wensien is a window through which episodes in her childhood may be viewed. On Saturday nights the family went downtown to pay their bills, and usually the children were given candy. Harriette remembered the beautiful cut glass and fine china in W. C. Den's store.

Another favorite pastime was playing with the children of Charles Neihardt, a monument dealer. Often she would stop to watch "Old Charlie" at work carving headstones, many of which can be seen today in Walnut Grove Cemetery.

Harriette further remembered that at Christmas the churches were open in the evening so the public might have a chance to see the decorations. At one time children were allowed to display their presents in the churches, but this practice was discontinued because it led to hard feelings. Roller skating was a favorite recreation, and she remembered the delicacies from the Strobel and Nace bakeries.



Christmas Eve at the Brownville Methodist Church, 1910. In the front row are Morgan Greene (second from right) and Arthur Earl (third from right). Arthur Earl/Brownville Historical Society



Mary Alice (Greene) Stewart and son, Kenneth, in Brownville, probably in the 1930s. Great Plains Black Museum

Childhood pranks seem to be a universal part of growing up. Harriette recalled pestering one Brownville citizen, who was well known for his drinking:

Another colored girl, Effie Brown, we chummed together just like sisters. And she'd say, "Here comes Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Harriette. Now, we let him pass and let's toss pebbles at him." And, oh, swearing, it would make the leaves curl upon the trees. Then, of course, we'd walk along. "What's the matter Mr. \_\_\_\_\_?" He said one day, "You dumb little niggers," he says, "I'll beat you till you're white."<sup>7</sup>

Harriette laughed heartily when she related this story, but that was seventy years after the fact and the story was told in the context of a warm holiday gathering with friends. No matter the amount of time and labor one's family had invested in

a community, there were always reminders of racial differences.

Morgan Greene was Harriette's only child. A photograph taken Christmas Eve 1910 shows him sitting in the front pew of the Methodist Church with his friend, Arthur Earl. The name of Morgan's father is unknown, though he was apparently a local white man. At age sixteen Morgan left Brownville to take a job as porter on a train that ran from Washington, D.C., to Florida. Jim Ford, Brownville depot agent, found the job for him. Later Senator Carl T. Curtis helped Morgan secure employment as a waiter in the U.S. Senate Dining Room. Still later, he managed a retired military officers' club in the Washington, D.C., area.<sup>8</sup>

Harriette Greene worked for several families over the years, doing housework, laundry and cooking, and nursing the sick. Apparently employment opportunities were adequate in Brownville in the early years, but as the population declined, so did the number of families who could afford domestic help. In her later years, Harriette depended on assistance from friends and neighbors, but she never asked for help. Ruth (Wensien) Simon recalled that it took a great deal of persuasion to convince Harriette to apply for county relief. When she understood it was simply a return from the taxes she had paid during her working years, she consented.

Harriette Greene lived in Brownville for eighty-eight of her ninety-two years. A year before her death on December 6, 1969, she told an *Omaha World-Herald* reporter, "I've worked hard and lived a good life in Brownville. I never wanted to leave because I liked the people there." The same attitude was revealed during an earlier interview: "Brownville still has people as good as anywhere on God's green footstool," she said.<sup>9</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> 1885 State Census, Nemaha County, ED 540:18; Harriette Greene, Brownville, Nebraska, interview by Adolph and Ruth Wensien, n.d. [1960s?].

<sup>2</sup> Greene interview; Wensien, Grand Army of the Republic, Department of Nebraska, "Civil War Veterans Buried in Nebraska," microfilmed card file, NSHS. Burial records do not give a date of interment.

<sup>3</sup> "Bulletin of the Brownville Historical Society" (Aug. 1968): 1-2. Harriette Greene provided the information to the unnamed interviewer.

<sup>4</sup> 1880 census, Nemaha County, ED 204:7. The 1900 census for Nemaha County, ED 89:1, records Harriette's birthdate as August 1877. This birth year was also given in "Brownville's Only Negro Won't Rebuild," *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 16, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> 1885 state census, Nemaha County, ED 540:18; *Burial Record Book and Map, 1884-Present*, Walnut Grove Cemetery Association, Brownville, Nebraska, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Bertha Calloway, Omaha, Nebraska, interviews by author, 1989-92.

<sup>7</sup> Greene interview.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth (Wensien) Simon, Auburn, Nebraska, interview by Patrick Kennedy, 1991; Arthur Earl, Brownville, interviews by Patrick Kennedy, 1989-92.

<sup>9</sup> "Brownville's Only Negro Won't Rebuild"; Greene interview.

# Archeology and the Search for African American Pioneer Sites in Southeastern Nebraska

By Rob Bozell, Archeology Division, Nebraska State Historical Society, and Molly Boeka, Department of Anthropology, University of Wyoming

For most modern residents of the Great Plains, the word archeology suggests the excavation of “prehistoric” sites such as Native American burial mounds, villages, and bison kill sites. However, archeological investigations can add clarity and detail to the more recent past as well—even to significant events, famous people, and broad patterns of political and socioeconomic change that are well documented.

One poorly understood topic in Nebraska’s recent past is the experience of late nineteenth century African American settlers. Research on African American settlers in southeastern Nebraska conducted by the author of the accompanying article, Patrick Kennedy, a history teacher at Omaha Benson High School, and his interest in presenting archeology to his students, were directly responsible for the first systematic archeological investigation of the black experience in Nebraska.

Kennedy’s research identified several Nemaha County sites that might retain archeological ruins left by African American settlers. One is the homestead of Benton Aldrich, which was established in 1865 and remained into the 1940s. Aldrich, a prominent white farmer and ardent abolitionist, assisted a number of former slaves who relocated in Nebraska. In 1880, he invited several former slaves living in Kansas to settle on his farm and work for him until they were able to purchase property. The Aldrich farm was selected for the 1997 Nebraska State Historical Society Public Archeology Dig, and for two weekends in October, Historical Society archeologists and more than fifty volunteers, including Kennedy and sixteen of his students, completed test excavations.

Based on Kennedy’s research and accounts by Aldrich’s great-grandson Robert Stoddard, now a professor of geography at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, an icehouse was constructed sometime after 1900 at or near the location of the dwelling formerly occupied by black residents. A pile of stone and concrete rubble about 100 meters from a large depression marking the primary Aldrich family house are all that remains of the icehouse. The icehouse rubble was in a deep depression four meters in diameter within a larger, shallower depression about eight meters in diameter. Armed with that information, the archeological team set out to confirm the location of the African American dwelling and gather some preliminary information about the life of its occupants.

Two “excavation units” (XUs) were selected for investigation. The first was a rectangular limestone foundation (XU 1) about thirty meters northwest of the icehouse ruin; the second was the icehouse ruin proper (XU 2). Both units were only partially excavated, with seventeen square meters dug in each. The XU 1 investigation exposed about two-thirds of the foundation wall line and sampled areas outside and inside the wall. The XU 2 work focused on squares within and outside the larger outer depression.



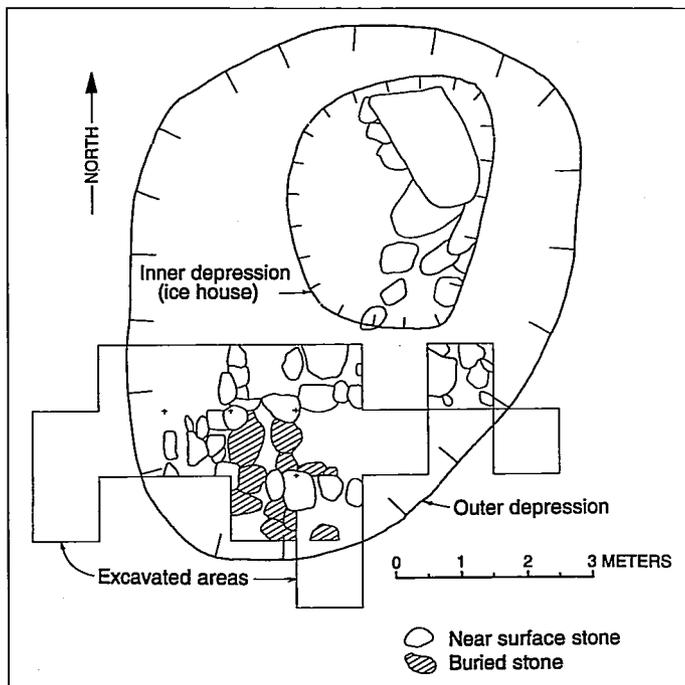
Benton Aldrich residence, 1903. Aldrich is seated at left, holding a grandchild. NSHS-N433:10-6

More than 3,000 artifacts, including limestone rubble, window glass, charcoal, pottery, bottle glass, animal bone, building hardware, nails, and personal items such as buttons, bullets, knife handles, pins, and buckles, were recovered. They provide important clues about the function and dates of features of the homestead site.

Our initial impression was that XU 1 was the black pioneer dwelling. Its long, rectangular limestone foundation was about the size and shape of a small dwelling, the foundation pattern suggested two rooms, and several large, cast-iron stove parts were discovered on the surface. XU 2, we thought, probably represented only the ruins of the post-1900 icehouse. The archeological investigation and study of material recovered reversed those notions.

Window glass and nails placed the structures in chronological order. Window glass thickness increased during the nineteenth century, and a formula can be used to determine approximate construction dates. The mean thickness of the XU 1 glass suggests a date of 1892, but the thickness of the XU 2 glass indicates construction between 1880 and 1885. The nails also suggest XU 2 is earlier than XU 1. Two types of nails were recovered; cut and wire. Both were present in each unit, but the earlier cut type was dominant in XU 2, and wire nails (generally post-1890s) were predominant in XU 1.

Other artifact classes suggest the outer depression at XU 2 contains the ruins of a domestic structure. It produced significantly more bottle glass, animal bone, pottery, and personal items than were collected from XU 1. In fact, the only category of material that was more abundant in XU 1 is tools and hardware. The type and diversity of material recovered from XU 2 is typical of domestic dwellings, but the XU 1 sample is not. We now are confident that XU 1 was probably a garage or shop dating from about 1900, and the outer depression at



Excavation Unit 2 held the ruins of the 1880s house lived in by African American settlers and a post-1900 icehouse. Drawing by Dell Darling.



Patrick Kennedy (standing, far right) and Omaha Benson High School students at the 1997 Aldrich Site archeology project.

XU 2 reflects the ruins of a living structure. Based on the dates and Robert Stoddard's information, XU 2 is certainly the ruins of the 1880s structure inhabited by African American settlers.

Although these investigations were preliminary and limited in scope, they suggest some cursory impressions about the research potential of African American archeology in south-

eastern Nebraska. More important, we now are confident that the site has been confirmed and is available for more extensive excavation in the future. Some preliminary conclusions:

- The XU 2 "floor" was nearly sixty centimeters below the surface. This, coupled with the presence of quantities of limestone and a depression, suggests the structure may have been more substantial than assumed, having had a foundation of limestone and possibly a cellar. Charcoal and burned earth were present on the floor, perhaps indicating that the structure burned.
- The few food remains recovered indicate pork and chicken were staple meats. Several rabbit bones were recovered and might reflect hunting. Canning jar lids also were retrieved, indicating vegetable food storage. Cat remains may be those of a family pet.
- A wide assortment of bottle glass and pottery types was collected, all typical of late nineteenth century wares. Although little of the material reflects "high status" ware, its diversity suggests the occupants enjoyed some measure of material culture choices.
- Several small test excavations in areas directly associated with the Aldrich family produced several "luxury" items including a marble, a doll part, and a toothbrush. No luxury items were recovered from XU 2, suggesting that the African Americans' socioeconomic status was lower than the Aldrichs'.
- No distinctively African materials were recovered. Although earlier sites in the southeastern United States yield personal items and ceramics of a clear ethnic nature, it is likely that by the late nineteenth century, production or curation of such items among African Americans was rare.
- Further work at the Aldrich site would be fruitful in adding detail to the life of African Americans in nineteenth century Nebraska. A complete excavation of XU 2 would certainly result in a more vivid understanding of their subsistence, architecture, technology, leisure, and material culture. Kennedy has identified several other sites, particularly in and around Brownville, and African American pioneer sites probably could be found in the Sandhills, the Blue River valley, and elsewhere in the state.

*A full record of the 1997 dig, "Archeological Investigations at the Aldrich Site, Nemaha County, Nebraska," is on file in the Archeology Division of the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln. Most archeological study of African Americans has taken place in the southeastern United States and the Caribbean. For more information, see The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life by Teresa Singleton (New York: Academic Press, 1985). For more information about dating window glass by its thickness, see "Windows on the Plains: An Analysis of Flat Glass Samples from Ten Nineteenth Century Plains Historic Sites," by Christopher M. Shoen in Central Plains Archaeology 2 (1990): 57-90.*