

Ohio genealogist recreates ancestral town

"You can't do genealogy without doing local history."

-Lolita Thayer Guthrie, OGN 37:3

Here's one genealogist's story.



A bricked-up well is all that remains of my Williams family's old homestead, but with the help of local records and interviews I have re-created our ancestral community in Marengo County, Alabama.

The Community

The area was never given a legal name. It was referred to as 'the place down by Beaver Creek,' 'near Pleasant Ridge,' or simply P.O. Star Rte. 13, Linden, Alabama. Ten miles off U.S. 43 South, down an unmarked, rutted and overgrown dirt road, the well and the dilapidated remains of two old houses are the only indication that this was once a thriving community of ex-slaves and their descendants from the late 1800s to 1960. The dirt road was eight miles from the center of Linden. In the early 1900s, that entry was lined with the mailboxes of the people who lived in the area of the Williams homestead that I shall refer to as The Community.

According to the 1870-1930 federal censuses, Jake Williams, my great-grandfather and an ex-slave, was one of 30-35 Black families who were sharecroppers, who later owned land in that area. Several of the plantation owners eventually sold or walked away from their land after growing cotton was no longer profitable.

Some seven miles down U.S. 43 S is Church Road, which also leads to The Community and Bethlehem Baptist Church and cemetery, which served the early Black families. A rebuilt replica of the original church is still active and hosts an annual Homecoming for descendants of those early settlers. After meeting many of those descendants, hearing about their families and learning about life in The Community, I was compelled to share their stories and re-create their community.

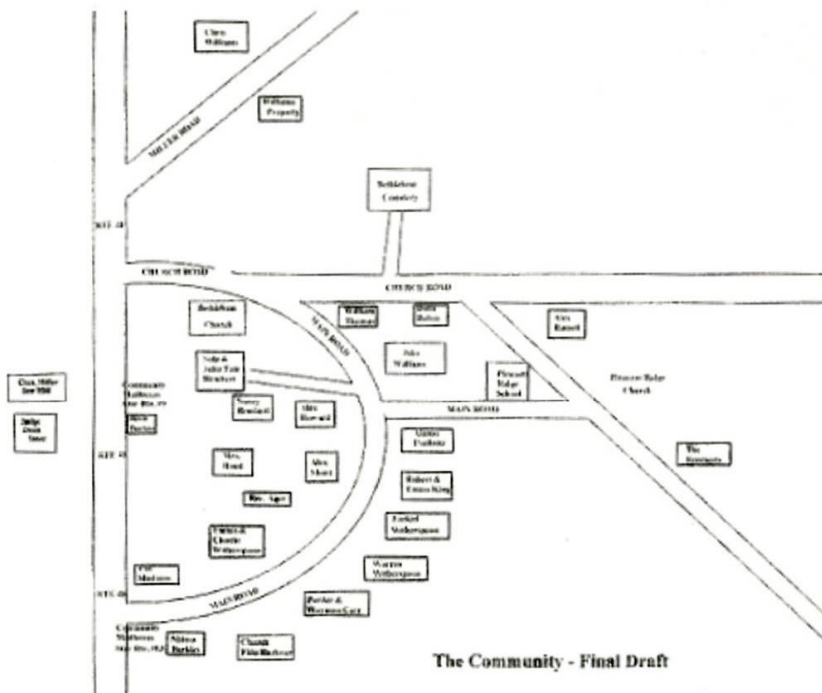
The Template

A descendant of the last family to leave the area gave me a photo taken in 1960 of the few homes left standing in The Community. It also showed that the dirt road I had traveled had been a large semi-circle curved around to the Bethlehem Baptist on Church Road. It was that road, the church, and the site of Jake's homestead that I used as landmarks to draw a template of The Community.

Template in hand, I then sought the exact location, dimensions and borders of The Community. Aided by old county maps and land plats, I learned that the area was bordered on the east by U.S. Rte. 43; west by the town of Myrtlewood; north by Calvary; and south by what is now called Miller. It was nine miles in length and an estimated twenty miles deep.

The next step included a second round of interviews with the descendants to ask: Who were your neighbors to the left and right? What family homes, farms and/or structures did you pass on your way to church, and on your way to the main highway and the mailboxes?

After several revisions of the template based on the interviews, I mailed copies to each respondent for review and comment. When I reached a consensus about the template among the respondents and saw that it matched census results, old land plats and church records, I was able to reconstruct The Community as the descendants remembered it.



The Community Support

During earlier interviews, I asked the descendants about their ancestors' role in making that settlement a community. They talked about the midwives, blacksmiths, carpenters, brick masons, well-diggers, and those who prepared the dead for burial and offered support to grieving families. I learned that my great-grandfather operated a grist mill and made syrup, and that he bartered for other goods and services when the buyer could not pay cash.

They told of families that came together to build houses, barns, cut timber, harvest food and slaughter animals. It was a self-sufficient community: a group of people who knew their survival depended on the cooperation and support of their neighbors. They realized there was little or no assistance outside of The Community.

Major changes to The Community began in the 1940s with the great migration of young Blacks to the north and west in search of better job opportunities to help raise their families. The elders remained and as they died out, so did The Community.

Reflections

It was with great resolve and pride that I documented The Community in a book titled *Jake Williams and his Descendants* in 2009. It can be found in the public library in Demopolis, AL and in the Alabama Department of History and Archives in Montgomery, AL. Family members and friends bought 100 copies for Christmas gifts in 2009, telling me, "This is the greatest gift that we could ever give our family. It is a legacy for future generations."



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