THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN TOWNS IN OKLAHOMA

We know we belong to the land, And the land we belong to is grand...

— Rogers and Hammerstein’s Oklahoma!

The musical Oklahoma! takes place in 1906, shortly before Oklahoma Territory became Oklahoma State. While the history of westward expansion leading up to statehood may be familiar, African American history in the Territory is far less commonly known. Between 1865 and 1920, there were over 50 all-black towns and settlements in Oklahoma, and several of these towns survive today. We’ve chosen to illuminate this often-unacknowledged chapter of Oklahoma history in our production.

The first African Americans arrived in Oklahoma long before the area was opened to white settlement. The forced migration of Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Seminole, and Chickasaw tribes from the southeastern United States to so-called “Indian Territories” west of the Mississippi included thousands of black slaves owned by Native Americans. After the Civil War, these slave populations were freed, and some were formally recognized as members of Native American tribes.

When Oklahoma was opened to settlement by non-Native Americans in 1889, black Americans rushed to the Territory for many of the same reasons as white settlers — land and economic opportunity. Several entrepreneurs saw a chance to create towns exclusively for African American settlement, where residents could live their lives insulated from the day-to-day indignities and hazards experienced by blacks elsewhere in the U.S. In these towns, African Americans could prove themselves to the rest of the nation as capable farmers, business owners, and political leaders. Some of these entrepreneurs and town planners dreamed even bigger — they hoped for statehood, populated and governed by African Americans.

Langston, Oklahoma was among the first black towns to be established after the 1889 Land Run. After serving as state auditor in Kansas (the highest elected office held by an African American in that state), E.P. McCabe moved to Oklahoma and founded Langston, about 40 miles from Oklahoma City, in 1889. Over the next few years, McCabe and other town founders sent agents to promote Langston among African Americans throughout the South. Recruiters spoke in rural churches, distributed copies of the Langston City Herald, and sold real estate packages (including a train ticket to nearby Guthrie). The largest African American town in Oklahoma was Boley, founded in 1903. By 1911, it boasted two colleges, three cotton gins, banks, a Masonic Grand Lodge, and a population of four thousand people.

Oklahoma had the highest concentration of all-black towns, but it was not the only state or territory where African American towns thrived. Nicodemus, Kansas was founded in 1877, and is the setting of the 1994 play Flyin’ West by Pearl Cleage. Here in Colorado, O.T. Jackson established the town of Dearfield (about 70 miles northeast of Denver) in 1910. By 1921, Dearfield was a thriving community of 700, with a lunch room, boarding house, churches, and an active social scene.

Despite the safe haven provided by many of these communities, they were not free of the fear and prejudice of neighboring towns. White residents of Oklahoma Territory resented the influx of African American migrants and feared the possibility of a majority black population and a black state (this fear was unfounded — estimates generally place the African American population at or below 10%). After Oklahoma became a state in 1907, the legislature passed Jim Crow laws, and many white Oklahomans refused to hire, rent/sell property to, or lend money to African Americans. Compounding these pressures, economic and natural catastrophes that devastated other small towns and cities in the 1920s and ‘30s – the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression – were equally devastating to black towns. Thirteen of these historic black towns survived and still exist in Oklahoma (Boley, Brooksville, Clearview, Grayson, Langston, Lima, Red Bird, Rentiesville, Summit, Taft, Tatums, Tullahassee, and Vernon).

In 1943, Oklahoma! premiered in the midst of World War II and resonated with audiences hungry for its blend of nostalgia for an idyllic past, and hope that today’s sacrifices will lead to a better future. The musical celebrates the tenacity and optimism of those who settled Oklahoma Territory under difficult circumstances — a tenacity we celebrate in the African American pioneers who helped build Oklahoma.

Want to learn more?
Oklahoma Historical Society www.okhistory.org
Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library, Denver history.denverlibrary.org/blair
Black American West Museum & Heritage Center, Denver www.bawmhc.org
—Heidi Schmidt, Dramaturg