

# District School #3: Alma, KS (1893-1925)

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A Case Study of Integrated Schooling

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Fall 2008

During the period that would become known as the Kansas Exodus, many African-American families migrated from the Jim Crow South into northern states. Though Kansas offered refuge for these oppressed people, the state had its own race issues. Kansas Legislature in 1879, some 17 years before Plessy v. Ferguson, ruled that cities of more than 15,000 residents must have segregated elementary schools. Within this segregated whole view of Kansas there were a number of schools that were integrated throughout all of this. The smaller population of Alma Township did not lend itself to a segregated education and therefore their schools were integrated. Alma also boasted one of the largest African-American populations in Wabaunsee County.<sup>1</sup> The Bean School, also called District School #3 (which was engraved above the door and portrayed in Figure 1), was located just outside of Alma and offered an integrated education from 1893 until 1942.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. Entry Way to Bean School.  
This sign above the door of the school reads Dist. No 3, the proper name of the school.

This paper however will focus solely on the period between the school's opening until the mid-1920s in an effort to create an account of Exoduster settler education in Kansas. The significance of this research is twofold. First, it will provide a detailed case study of an integrated school that provided all students with a truly equal education, and second, it will allow for further tracking of Exoduster populations and their lives once in Kansas.

<sup>1</sup> Kansas Federal State Census 1895: Wabaunsee County, Alma Township.

<sup>2</sup> *Stories of the Past: The third edition of Wabaunsee County History* (2000).

Before diving into the Bean School itself, one must understand the environment, physical and social, in and around Alma. Alma Township is located in Wabaunsee County and nestled in the Flint Hills. While there was not abundant surface or groundwater available to the early settlers, the combination of bluestem prairie and significant yearly precipitation made the soil quite fertile. During this period towns across the West were greatly affected, positively or negatively, by the placement of railroad lines. There was little presence felt from the railroad in Alma until the early 1900s.<sup>3</sup> Thus the social make-up would have been one of family homesteads and most travel being done by foot or horse. The absence of a railroad would have also meant that families had to rely on each other for various goods and services; there would have been little room for race to come between them. Most important to the social make-up of Alma in this period is its original settlers. As one would expect, those who originally settle an area will bring with them their set of beliefs and attitudes along with cultural practices. This single piece of information is vital to the experience black Exodusters would have had. Alma Township was settled by western Europeans, including a large number of Germans. Many later settlers were also former members of the Union army,<sup>4</sup> who most certainly had negative views towards the southern policies which Exodusters were fleeing from. The significant presence of both these groups would have bided well for prospective Exodusters given the anti-slavery ideals of both Germans and Union officers in general.

The agrarian township that was Alma would have molded the educational experience. As suggested by prominent African-American Booker T. Washington, agriculture could serve as

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<sup>3</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky, and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> George Washington Owens, *Autobiography of George Washington Owens*, (University Archives, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS).

the solution to the race divisions. Settlers of any race would suffer through drought and weak crops together, while also celebrating successful harvests together as brothers of the soil not skin color.<sup>5</sup> The fact that Bean School was integrated would lend credibility to Washington's ideal since it was located within a predominately farm-based community. The locations of homesteads in Alma, for the most part, were not segregated and thus one would have neighbors from any and all backgrounds. Having been raised in this environment, children would learn to see their classmates of either race as simply that, classmates. In fact, Curtis Gardenhire, a black pupil of Bean School, felt that all in all he was treated quite well. He does recall however, a few occasions when a white classmate would get upset and call him "nigger."<sup>6</sup> Though tragic in and of itself, this experience paled in comparison to the experiences of black pupils in the south during the same era.

A significant number of blacks who settled in Alma had come from Tennessee as part of the first wave of Exodusters.<sup>7</sup> Many would have been placed or directed to the area by the Kansas Freedman's Relief Association while others found their way on their own<sup>8</sup>. Once in Wabaunsee County, many blacks settled alongside fellow Exodusters, as well as white settlers already there. Surprisingly the Exodusters and European immigrants would come to learn that they came to Kansas for the same reasons, homes and freedom. The children would have worked alongside their families on the farm, and when the workload permitted would hire themselves out to other farms for extra earnings. Once winter came, and the school period

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<sup>5</sup> Annie P. W. Hawkins, "Hoeing Their Own Row," *Kansas History, a Journal of the Central Plains* 22, 3 (1999).

<sup>6</sup> Curtis Gardenhire, interview by Dawn Fulton, written notes, Wabaunsee County Historical Society (Alma, KS).

<sup>7</sup> Kansas Federal State Census 1895: Wabaunsee County, Alma Township. See also *Autobiography of George Washington Owens*.

<sup>8</sup> *New Branches from Old Roots* (1976), 873. Wabaunsee County Historical Society (Alma, KS).

began, the children all attended the same local school. Given that the closest all black school was in Manhattan, some thirty miles away, segregation was never really an option.<sup>9</sup> This should not take away from the uniqueness of Bean School however. The grass-roots approach of black education in Kansas left it, for the most part, up to the local communities to settle the issue of segregation. The exception was for “first-class” cities, ones whose populations exceeded 15,000. Alma was not close to being in this category and the truth is most blacks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century living outside of first-class cities remained in segregated and substandard educational facilities.<sup>10</sup> Bean School was an exception to the rule, and provided a special opportunity for black children, and the significance was not lost on them. The one, truly legitimate way for blacks to have equal educational facilities is to be in the same classroom, listening to the same teacher, alongside the white children. This is what Bean School provided during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, long before Brown v. Board.

In 1893, the year that the permanent stone structure of the Bean School opened its doors, there were seven black children that lived within its district and two of them attended school that year.<sup>11</sup> An average class size for much of the school’s operation was between twenty and thirty pupils and the number of black students was consistently similar to that first year. However, those early years would come to serve as the jumping board for one prominent black Kansan. George Washington Owen, the first African-American graduate of Kansas State University, lived and grew up a few miles northwest of Alma. His family’s farm was just south of

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<sup>9</sup> George Washington Owens, *Autobiography of George Washington Owens*, (University Archives, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS).

<sup>10</sup> James C. Carper, “The Popular Ideology of Segregated Schooling: Attitudes Toward the Education of Blacks in Kansas, 1854-1900,” *Kansas History* 1(1978): 254-265.

<sup>11</sup> School District #3 Binder, Wabaunsee County Historical Society (Alma, KS).

Bean School, where he and his siblings attended school as the only black pupils at that time.<sup>12</sup> And according to his accounts, the children of the area, black or white, grew up together, played together and worked together all throughout their youths. This is further evidence of Kansas tolerance during an increasingly intolerant nation.

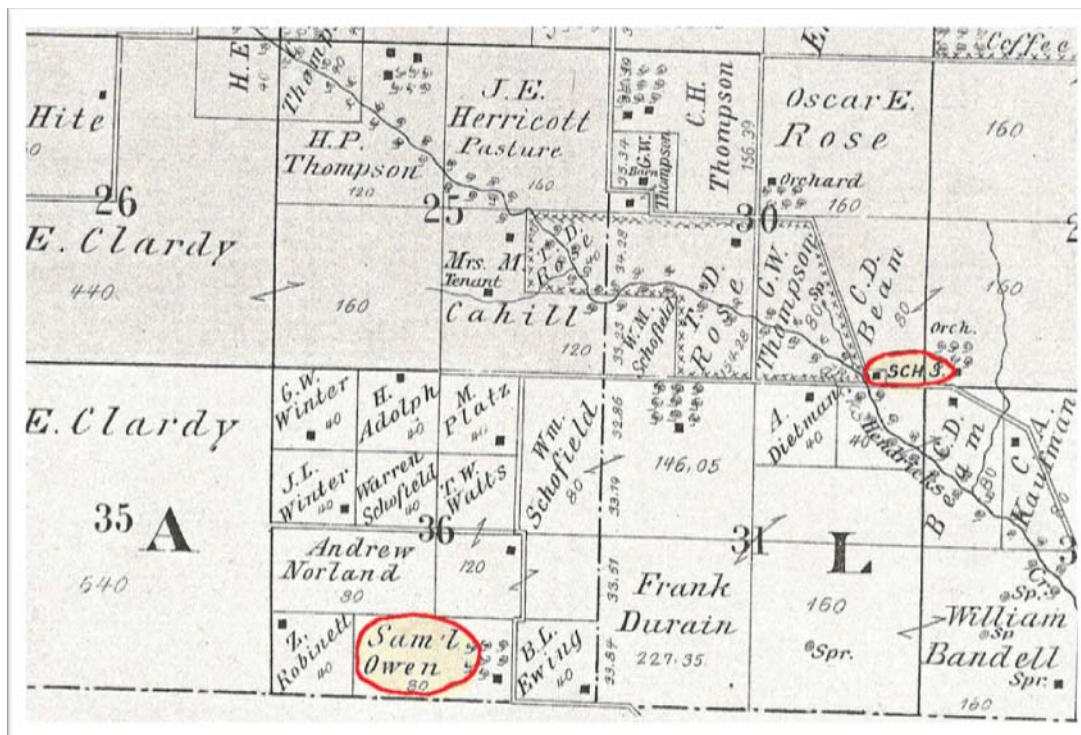


Figure 2. Plat Map of Alma Township 1880.

*This section of the map conveys the close proximity of the Owens' farm to Bean School.*

Another local black family that sent multiple children to Bean School was the Gardenhires. The Gardenhire family was quite active in the Alma area for many years. John Gardenhire was an active member in the community and served as a leader in the Bible Study held at the Bean School along with William Hensel, John Thompson, and George Hensel (all

<sup>12</sup> George Washington Owens, *Autobiography of George Washington Owens*, (University Archives, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS).

white members of the community).<sup>13</sup> His children, Shirley, Ruth and Curtis all attended the Bean School; Curtis started in 1908 while both Ruth and Shirley started prior to that. The Gardenhires lived but a half mile from the school and walked most days to class. On truly bad days like many other students, their father took them on horseback.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 3. Ruins of the Former Bean School. Alma, KS.**  
*After a recent fire, only the stone outer walls of the school remain.*

The school experience would have been quite similar for the pupils. Children were expected to walk to school on most days, and thus children did not attend school until they were old enough to make the trek.<sup>15</sup> Obstacles like fences, creeks, and weather needed to be dealt with and parents needed to feel confident that their children could handle it. Some of the

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<sup>13</sup> Marvin Hensel, "Notes by Marvin Hensel," School District #3 Binder, Wabaunsee County Historical Society (Alma, KS). See also *Wabaunsee Community as Remembered by Edward Leonard III* (1993).

<sup>14</sup> Curtis Gardenhire, interview by Dawn Fulton, written notes, Wabaunsee County Historical Society (Alma, KS).

<sup>15</sup> Alvin S. McCoy, "Good-By to its Rural Schools," *Topeka Star*, March 30.

harder days were during harsh winters when the children had to cross pastures and creeks and crawl beneath fences, sometimes digging through feet of snow.<sup>16</sup> An older sibling was a blessing for these sorts of things. Most children attended the school in the district that they lived in and would walk, at most, a little over a mile each way. Occasionally extended members of the family or family friend's children would stay with a family and attend their local school.<sup>17</sup> The Bean School in Alma seemed to have a new teacher each year with very few staying for more than one term. It was common for rural schoolteachers who did not live in the district to board with local families and Alma was no different as the homes of Paul Geisler and Gus Hafenstine housed several Bean School teachers. School attendance was generally good and many students took pride in perfect attendance. However, when the family farm was in need of help during harvest students were often forced to be absent. It was common in Wabaunsee County and other rural areas in this period to have a change in enrollment on March 1. This was the date that farm renters moved to different farms.<sup>18</sup>

Curriculum for these early schools was focused around reading, writing and arithmetic. The textbooks used were generally whatever the local community could



Figure 4. Remnants of Bean School's Well. This pump was used to fetch the water during the schools operation.

<sup>16</sup> Gertrude Hensel Delaney, "Recollections of Country Grade Schools," Wabaunsee County Historical Society (Alma, KS).

<sup>17</sup> Curtis Gardenhire, interview by Dawn Fulton, written notes, Wabaunsee County Historical Society (Alma, KS).

<sup>18</sup> *Stories of the Past: The third edition of Wabaunsee County History* (2000). See also *Wabaunsee Community as Remembered* by Edward Leonard III (1993).



gather up from their own homes and often times included the Bible.<sup>19</sup> Like most schools at this time, Bean School had a bell on top of it and an American flag displayed at the front of the classroom. Each day would begin at 9 in the morning with a salutation of the Flag and the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and end at 4 in the afternoon. The students were allotted a one hour lunch period as well as two fifteen minute recesses. The students, both black and white, would often gather in the yard around the school during these, as well as before and after school, and play games such as baseball, pump-and-run, pullaway, tag and snowball fights in the winter.<sup>20</sup> The school was heated by coal and the water fetched from a well outside.

Unfortunately, due to a fire just a few years ago, all that remains of this historic schoolhouse is a stone skeleton of a building. This significance and importance of Bean School should not be tossed aside like the scraps and debris inside the abandoned structure. The Bean School is not just Kansas history but American history. It was part of a unique group of schools that offered educational equality in its truest sense even when much of the state and country were experiencing tremendous racial turmoil. The residents of Alma did not wait for a judicial order to come down and provide integrated schooling but rather were their own moral compasses. The Alma community has always taken great pride in the Bean School and will continue to do so. However, I hope that the collection of information in this article will provide even greater reason for pride. The Exodusters left their homes in search of opportunity and hope for greater equality. Alma and several other towns throughout Kansas provided this and more. The Bean School gave people like George Washington Owen, a son of Exodusters and ex-

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Gardenhire, interview by Dawn Fulton, written notes, Wabaunsee County Historical Society (Alma, KS). See also *Stories of the Past: The third edition of Wabaunsee County History* (2000)., George Washington Owens, *Autobiography of George Washington Owens*, (University Archives, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS).

slaves, an opportunity that few before them had, a formal and equal education. Owen went on to become exactly what the southern plantation owner of old had feared, a highly educated, motivated and successful individual. This is testament to the power of education and further validates the black communities overwhelming desire for schools post bellum.

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