Lick Creek African American Settlement

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The first African American settlers came to Orange County, Indiana before 1820. Led by Jonathan Lindley, eleven families traveled with a group of sympathetic Quakers in search of a new land which forbade slavery. Jonathan Lindley settled in Orange County in 1811, five years before the County was established and Indiana became a state.

These settlers were free citizens who fled racial persecution and increasingly restrictive laws for free blacks in their previous home in North Carolina. Traveling with the Quakers offered some protection on their journey and the promise of supportive neighbors upon their arrival.

According to the census records, there were 96 blacks living in Orange County in 1820. As more blacks came to the area they purchased land from the United States of America (patented) in what we now call the Lick Creek African American Settlement area. Other names the area has been called are Little Africa, South Africa and Paddy's Garden. The first African - Americans to purchase land in the Lick Creek area were Mathew Thomas in 1831, and Benjamin Roberts, Peter Lindley, and Elias Roberts all in 1832. By 1855, the settlement reached its maximum size of 1,557 acres.

By 1860, 260 blacks lived in Orange County. Almost a third of them lived in Southeast Township in the Lick Creek African American Settlement, at that time a racially integrated community.

One of the few sources of information on the residents of Lick Creek African American Settlement comes from their freedom papers filed in the County Courthouse. When the overseas slave trade ended, the practice of kidnapping free blacks and selling them into slavery in Kentucky became prevelant. Once kidnapped, the free blacks had little recourse. There is also a County Register of 1853 which Indiana law required of all negroes and mullatos. A physical description, often including distinguishing marks, is listed and statements by white witnesses vouching for the registrants free status and character.

A focal point of the settlement was the church. In 1843, Thomas and Matilda Roberts sold one acre of their 120 acres to five trustees for its establishment. The deed states the trustees (Elias Roberts, Mathew Thomas, Thomas Roberts, Isaac Scott, and Samuel Chandler) were to erect or cause to erect a house or place of worship for use by the members of the African Episcopal Church (AME) of the United States of America. This church operated from 1843-1869.

This AME church was near the site of the colored Methodist Union Meeting House. The Methodist Union Meeting House was built in 1837 on land owed by Ishmael Roberts. It is unclear when the Methodist Union Meeting House was abandoned, but it was probably replaced by the new AME church.

Near the AME Church is the Thomas and Roberts family cemetery. There are at least 14 marked headstones. Burials occurred between 1856-1891. The presence of professionally made stones attest to the family's wealth. The last person to be buried there was Simon Locust in 1891. He served in the Civil War in Company E of the 13th Infantry Regiment of the U.S. Colored Troops.

For More Information:

Hoosier National Forest
811 Constitution Avenue
Bedford, IN 47421
(812) 275-5987
Toll Free: 1-866-302-4173
Federal relay for deaf and
hearing impaired: 1-800-877-8339

According to early histories, Chambersburg was a station on the underground railroad. Apparently it was the first stop north of the Ohio River. The Quakers in the area were instrumental in this effort and the former Eli Lindley House may have been this station.

At the end of the Civil War, the population at Lick Creek began to sharply decline and by the early 1900's the African Americans were gone. In fact, many left in the year 1862. Why they left is still a mystery. Several factors probably contributed to this decline. The war was in progress, a boom of industry occurred in nearby cities, and racial pressure was increasing with the establishment of anti-black organizations. The last resident of Lick Creek Settlement was William Thomas who sold his land in 1902.

After the black landowners left the area, the land was purchased by white neighbors who continued farming until they were unable to pay their taxes. Many lost their land in the 1930's. This area is now part of the Hoosier National Forest and is the focus of ongoing archaeological research.

Further sources of information:

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