

Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877-1915

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Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877-1915, by Kenneth Marvin Hamilton. Blacks in the New World Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991. xii, 192 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

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Focusing on five towns settled by African-Americans—Nicodemus, Kansas; Mound Bayou, Mississippi; Langston City and Boley, Oklahoma; and Allensworth, California—Kenneth Marvin Hamilton briefly describes their origins, early development, and promotion. One might naturally assume that these towns were founded for racial reasons—by African-Americans escaping persecution. In an appendix, "Bibliographic Essay on Black Towns in the Trans-Appalachian West," Hamilton discusses his precursors in studies of black towns who have emphasized the racial separation motive. Hamilton challenges this interpretation. He sees black towns as entrepreneurial efforts first and foremost. Hamilton categorically concludes that "neither the unique heritage of African-Americans nor white Americans' reaction to blacks produced any sharp differences in the origin and early evolution of black towns and white or biracial towns" (149). Hamilton argues that economic gain, rather than racial concerns, motivated the developers and settlers of black towns.

The entrepreneurs who founded these communities financed or served as agents of undeveloped land platted into farmsteads. These developers' operations, according to Hamilton, were not substantially different from those of white developers. Their pitch, however, targeted African-Americans, just as some promoters appealed to certain ethnic groups who wanted to realize the dream of farming on their own land and, less importantly, escape local racial persecution.

Hamilton's emphasis on Booker T. Washington's influence on these developers tends to underscore the racial separation theme. Most of the entrepreneurs, and certainly a large number of the settlers in these towns, found inspiration, directly and indirectly, from Washington's credo of self-help and community organization. For example, Washington endorsed Mound Bayou, and it became a haven for blacks fleeing local terrorism. But Mound Bayou did not develop as anticipated. Instead, it became absorbed into a larger economy not distinguished by race.

Despite the good intentions of entrepreneurs and the best efforts of farmers, these towns followed the course of hundreds of western towns. The success or failure of the towns, according to Hamilton, most often depended on the proximity of a railroad station. The rail-

road saved Boley, for instance, while the lack of a rail connection doomed Nicodemus. Langston did not get a railroad, but it found a modicum of financial stability by founding a black college, while Allensworth failed in a similar effort and consequently languished.

Hamilton's study strings an interpretive wire through widely spaced fence posts. His few geographically diverse case studies, from Mississippi to Oklahoma to Kansas to California, leaves one wondering how representative these five case studies are of the sixty-four black towns listed in the appendix. Iowa's famous black town, Buxton, is listed, for example, but its economic base in company coal mining would put it in a very different category of town promotion. The inclusion of maps showing the location of these five towns, moreover, could have shown their geographical relationships to other black towns and larger urban areas. One could speculate, for example, how much isolation from larger urban areas figured in the attraction of settlers and the success of black towns. Settlement in urban areas apparently offered African-Americans more opportunities, and therefore black towns had to offer something else—possibly racial separation. In California, for example, "the vast majority of the black immigrants settled in other areas of the state and especially in the cities, but the developers of Allensworth attempted to redirect a portion of the incoming African-Americans to their town and its hinterland" (138). What Hamilton's study lacks is more analysis of the early settlers' motives.

The final sentence of Hamilton's study reiterates his thesis, but also suggests an intriguing speculation that cries out for scholarly attention. Developers founded black towns for economic reasons, as Hamilton argues: "Although at a later stage of development, as evidenced by the history of Mound Bayou, there are some indications racial discrimination significantly affected blacktown promotion, America's racial ideology produced few notable differences in the early evolution of black towns and their white and biracial counterparts" (152). Whether it was the interaction of whites and blacks as transportation improved, or racial tension on a national scale, or economic competition that eventually soured race relations, Hamilton provides a description of the developers' motives in these five towns.

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