

Witness to History:
Booker T.
WASHINGTON



Visits Boley

By Norman L. Crockett

In 1905 Booker T. Washington visited the tiny settlement of Boley in Indian Territory.¹ Boley's business community was excited about the arrival of the prominent educator and certainly the most powerful and well-known black leader in America. Town leaders were seeking incorporation at the time, and they hoped the arrival of Washington would publicize the community and attract new settlers. Moreover, many Boley residents shared the Tuskegeean's ideas on how to resolve what was then referred to as the "race problem."²

Washington had counseled blacks to cease their mobility and concentrate on what he called racial and moral uplift, and advised them at least for the time being to abandon demands for social and political equality. One year before he died in 1915, he returned to Boley, this time the head of a delegation of the fourteenth annual meeting of the National Negro Business League holding its convention in Muskogee. Washington had organized the NNBL in Boston in 1900 to encourage the creation of black business and trade skills. Ironically, his two visits to Boley corresponded to the birth and death of Boley as a viable community.

On his initial visit in 1905, Washington spent at least a week in the twin territories. He spoke at the Guthrie Opera House and conferred with A.W. Sango, a prominent Muskogee politician and head of the Tallahassee Mission. After his return to Alabama, Washington sent a brief article to *The Outlook* describing his experiences in the West. In "Boley: A Negro Town in the West," he argued that the new community represented one of the most interesting of the all-black towns in the United States.³ Always one to slightly exaggerate, he pictured Boley as a place where Indian drums could be heard at night and which was located in an area where horse thieves and outlaws still resided.⁴

In the *Outlook* article, Washington also repeated a well-known tale concerning the reasons underlying the founding of Boley. According to this story, two white men were arguing in Weleetka over the potential for black self-government. Boley, according to Washington, resulted from the argument. However, as historian Kenneth Hamilton has clearly shown, a group of land speculators wanting to sell town lots on a marginal piece of land near the Fort Smith and Western Railroad in Okfuskee County developed the town of Boley.⁵

One of the many reasons for Washington's visit was a chance to study Native American culture. He wanted to institute Indian education at the Tuskegee Institute, so while in Boley, he asked to meet a number of natives. To his surprise he was always introduced to a black person. In time he discovered that the term native referred to ex-slaves of the Creeks, blacks emancipated by the Reconstruction treaties following the Civil War. Because of their command of English and their ability to communicate in the Creek language, a few blacks rose to important positions in the tribe—negotiators they were called. Although Boley leaders prohibited liquor sales inside the town limits, Washington was informed that natives sometimes traveled to Prague, a ten-mile trip, and returned to Boley to "shoot up the town."

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Some Boley residents became accustomed to the sound of gunfire at night. The wife of the first city attorney, Moses J. Jones, recalled that several nights each week she extinguished all the lamps in their house because the light provided a convenient target for the intoxicated natives and Indians who rode through the town on a spree. Many times, she recalled, she sat in the dark, fearful for the safety of her family.⁶ A few deaths resulted from such incidents.

Along with the Creek freedmen, a number of blacks from the South, ex-slaves of southern planters, had been drifting into Indian Territory since the 1880s, joined by an escalating migration of southern whites. The growing community of whites produced friction



between the two groups of former slaves. A number of Creek freedmen objected to the arrival of the ex-slaves from the South because they felt the newcomers were too willing to acquiesce to Southern white racial attitudes. In addition, in a short time even Creeks made no distinction between their former slaves and other blacks. In 1904 when the school board of the Creek Nation ruled that all blacks, regardless of tribal affiliation, would attend separate schools, the

ex-slaves of the Creeks were furious. As a consequence of this polarization within the territorial black community, Boley and other all-black towns in the Creek Nation were occupied almost exclusively by blacks who had migrated there from the South or from northern states.⁷

Washington also erred in the *Outlook* article concerning whether whites were excluded from Boley. He repeated a popular story that whites were prohibited from entering the community after dark. Such was not the case. Boley's leaders constantly lectured residents through editorials and articles in *The Boley Progress*, the weekly

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

newspaper, that all people regardless of color should be treated with respect; whites who left Boley feeling they had been treated well might help dispel any misconceptions regarding the race or the town. A number of whites lived near Boley, shopped there, and



Booker T. Washington (opposite) dedicated his life to the educational, social, and political advancement of the nation's black citizens. The National Negro Business League, organized in 1900 (above), promoted the development of business and trade skills (Courtesy Hollis Burke Frissell Library, Tuskegee University).

collected mail at the town post office. White salesmen stayed at the local hotel and sold their wares to merchants. Most residents did object, however, to whites who came to the community seeking work, and most preferred that they not settle there permanently.⁸

Nine years after his first visit, Washington returned to Boley as the head of a delegation of the National Negro Business League meeting in Muskogee. Always looking for new members, Washington hoped to form several new chapters in Oklahoma prior to and during the convention. In 1913 he sent his organizer, Ralph W. Tyler, into the state, instructing him to visit most of the all-black towns and to contact black leaders in Oklahoma's major cities. By November, Tyler had met with civic leaders in Oklahoma City, Guthrie, McAlester, Muskogee, and Tulsa. In a note to Wash-



Boley's civic leaders (above) relied on Washington's visits to Boley to capture the attention of new settlers and to promote capital investment in the all-black town (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).

ington, he described the latter community as “a regular Monte Carlo.” Tyler arrived in Boley on the day after Christmas. He delivered a speech praising the NNBL at Boley’s new Masonic temple. At that gathering Boley leaders invited Washington and the entire Muskogee convention to visit their community.⁹

Tyler personally felt that the choice of Muskogee for the national meeting represented a serious mistake. Previous NNBL conventions had been held in large eastern cities. Few people, he argued to Washington, would be willing to travel to such a small community in the West, and as a consequence, attendance would be minimal. Washington disagreed. He felt the special trip to Boley, an all-black town, might well constitute a unique attraction to the delegates at the convention, so he instructed his private secretary, Emmett Scott, to publicize the Boley visit as much as possible. Scott also doubted the advisability of the Muskogee location, but followed instructions.¹⁰

A potential problem arose in Boley with two groups, the Young Men's Progressive League and the Boley Commercial Club, struggling for dominance. Washington would never enter such a conflict, for throughout his life, the Tuskegeean went to great pains to make certain that no act of discrimination occurred in his presence or that whites never observed racial disharmony around him. Thus, Washington instructed Scott to check into the problem and to withhold any answer to the Boley invitation until later. Scott wrote T.J. Elliot, a Muskogee businessman and head of the state chapter of the National Negro Business League, asking him to visit Boley and check the situation there. Elliot, who was already aware of the conflict between the two groups, agreed. In January he met with the two factions, telling them that unless they could make peace with one another Washington would not come. Elliot reported to Scott that the problem in Boley had been resolved. Just to make certain Scott contacted Elliot during the summer and was assured

Townsite promotion was a dominant theme in black newspapers throughout the territorial and early statehood years (Taken from The Boley Progress).

OPEN YOUR EYES
 TO THE POSSIBILITIES OF
 B O L E Y
 AND THE
 Indian Territory

SPECIAL LOT SALE

IN BOLEY I. T.

There is now market, at Boley, Indian Territory, Creek Nation, two hundred and twenty five business and resident lots. Residence lots from \$25 to \$30 and business lots from \$50 to \$75.

~~Terms as follows: on resident~~ lots, \$5.00 down and \$5.00 within in thirty days and \$10 within the next sixty days and the last

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

by him in June that no conflict existed in Boley—no embarrassing incident, he said, would take place.¹¹

Boley boosters seemed elated. Immediately, the *Boley Progress* publicized the Tuskegeean's visit and ran full-length columns of Washington's speeches, praising him as the greatest black leader in history. Washington utilized black town support to build membership in the NNBL, with many businessmen in Boley taking an active part in the state and national organizations. In turn, Boley leaders sometimes asked for his help. For example, in September,

THE BOLEY PROGRESS.

"All Men Up—Not Some Men Down."

VOL. 1 BOLEY, INDIAN TERRITORY, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1900 NO. 20

Come to Boley

The story of Boley, The story of the glory of Boley has been told and told again. But it loses nothing in the telling; and unless for some particular season one is interested in the progress of the city, he is apt to miss connection with the record of its wonderful progress; for the story of yesterday's moon old, and that of today is quickly changed into a back number. In her onward march of prosperity, so wonderful, the changes so numerous, the only way to remain in touch with them is to keep one eye continuously on her record of activity. Not even the Boley of today would recognize the Boley of a year ago, in spite of the short space of time.

Boley Stands Ape. Nothing like her ever happened before. Nothing like her will ever happen again. The birth of this town reads like a fairy story, and her marvelous development has the effect of intensifying the likeness to the results that were produced through the agency of Aladdin's lamp.

Boley never was swarming cloths. She had no period of childhood. For her there was no baby food. Instead, at the start, for the opening of the town, she may be said to have leaped a one bound to the adult age; a burton young quation, with a harvest hand's appetite and the capacity of a genius for accomplishing things. Boley surprised the country from center to circumference when she was born. Since then, more quietly, but none the less effectively, she has continued on her way, demolishing all known records and astonishing the world by the push and activity of her people and the variety of her resources.

A wooded hill and valley has been transformed in a wonderfully short space of time into one of the most progressive of all the new towns along the Big Knolls and Western R.R. This statement is a broad one, but it can be made good. The whole of Boley, in which but a few short months ago almost the only fire seen

The Boley Progress Booklet T.

O. H. BRADLEY,
Editor and Publisher.

Entered as Second Class matter on the post Office at Boley Ind. Territory, August 22, 1900.

Published every Tuesday at Boley, Creek Nation, Indian Territory.

All letters and communications should be addressed to the Boley Progress, Boley, T. T.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES.	
One Year	\$1.00
Six months	.50
Three months	.25
Single Copy	.05

Advertising rates made known on application to the office.

When you see two people who dislike you whispering together doesn't it give you a funny feeling?

Pay up your subscription. Please. It is only a small amount. So Do Not Put it off but send it in today.

The man, the city or the nation that loses heart because of one or even many defeats isn't worth much any way. It's the knowing how to wipe the hard knocks, without flinching and to tackle the next task with good heart that counts.

Many of the citizens of Boley were in Guthrie Saturday to meet Dr. Booker T. Washington. He said in conversation with the editor that he was greatly interested in Boley and he approved of the spirit in which the

T. B. ARMSTRONG

FINE Groceries and Hardware

"We lead, all others may follow."

A complete line of Staple and Fancy Groceries, Hardware (Our motto is "Neatness and Dispatch.")

BOLEY INDIAN TERRITORY

HOTEL BOLEY

Located in Main street, near depot. Best class rooms. Table d'hôte with the delicacies of the season. Special attention given the traveling public.

RATES \$1 Per DAY

J. F. GOODEN, Prop'r

Washington's 1905 visit to the twin territories generated a great deal of press coverage and support (Taken from The Boley Progress).

1915, Boley banker David Turner, who later would be killed in a robbery by a member of the "Pretty Boy" Floyd gang, wrote to Tuskegee asking Washington to encourage people with money to settle in the community.¹²

On Saturday, August 22, Washington, accompanied by a delegation of NNBL members, spoke at the Boley city park where he



Booker T. Washington in his Tuskegee office, approximately one year before his last visit to Boley in August, 1915 (Courtesy Tuskegee University).

advised blacks to cease their mobility. In his address, he specifically referred to Alfred Sam, an Akim Chaif from the Gold Coast who was organizing a back-to-Africa movement in Okfuskee County. Washington counseled his audience to remain in Oklahoma and, as he had stated in the Atlanta Exposition speech many years earlier, “to cast down your bucket where you are.” Much to the consternation of Boley’s leaders, Washington also went to Clearview, an all-black town approximately ten miles from Boley and located near the Fort Smith and Western Railroad. Clearview school children met him at the train and a group of local horsemen known as the Rough Riders performed.¹³

Washington had mixed emotions regarding all-black towns, especially Boley. He personally opposed the northward migration of blacks because he felt they should remain in the South to work out their own destinies; the less transient races, he believed, could determine their own fate. In regard to Boley and the twenty-five other black towns in Oklahoma, he saw them as places where people could learn self government, morally uplift themselves,

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

and develop leadership and industrial skills—a resting place, he called Boley, on the path of advancement. Conversely, if the all-black town was taken to its logical extreme, blacks, in his opinion, would suffer from their lack of contact with whites and the two races would remain apart.¹⁴

This self-defeating structural flaw might have been solved if not for a number of other problems encountered during Boley's brief era of economic promise. Foremost was racism. Although many whites liked the idea of a segregated all-black town, Boley never received proportionate shares of tax revenues for roads, bridges, schools, or other internal improvements. Compounding the white resentment was the fact that Boley voters were solidly Republican. It was obvious to anyone by 1906 that the black communities held the balance of political power in Okfuskee County, where the white towns of Weleetka and Okemah consistently split votes between the two parties. The result was disenfranchisement after statehood. In 1907 the grandfather clause denied most blacks the vote, while Jim Crow laws segregated them in most areas of the state. At the local level, through threats of violence, white commercial clubs, as they were called, forced black farmers near Boley off their land. Black laborers found it increasingly difficult to obtain employment.¹⁵

To be sure, Boley residents faced prejudice and discrimination, but the idea of building a viable agricultural service center in 1905 ran counter to the major economic trends of the period. Thousands of rural white communities, unhampered by discrimination, failed to compete in the national economy at the same time. Boley merchants found it difficult to obtain the capital necessary to extend credit to area farmers who desperately needed it. As a consequence, both farmers and merchants became insolvent. Running counter to national economic trends, Main Street was dying, not just in Boley, but in the entire country.

Boley faced other problems from the beginning as well. Very early, farmers in the hinterland of Boley concentrated on the production of short-staple cotton. Okfuskee became known as a "cotton county." But as many people in the American South discovered, both before and after the Civil War, growing cotton led to perpetual debt for the producer and failed to develop the economy internally. The dramatic fall in cotton prices in 1913–1914 proved disastrous for farmers in the Boley area and the town merchants who had furnished them supplies during the growing season. Poverty invaded the town.

Once Boley no longer held out the dream of economic success, residents left in large numbers—a few joined Alfred Sam in a

back-to-Africa movement, some went to Canada, others journeyed farther west, while most moved to larger cities seeking employment. During their residence in Boley, however, many developed self respect and held leadership positions that aided them in later years. In November, 1915, Booker T. Washington died suddenly from diabetes; the death of Boley, Oklahoma, lasted much longer and represented a painful process.

ENDNOTES

*Norman L. Crockett is Professor of History at the University of Oklahoma, Norman.

¹ The history of Boley, along with that of Clearview and Langston, Oklahoma, is covered in greater detail in Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979).

² *Boley Progress*, March 9, 1905.

³ Booker T. Washington, "Boley: A Negro Town in the West," *The Outlook*, 88 (January 4, 1908): 28-31.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Kenneth M. Hamilton, "Townsite Speculation and the Origin of Boley, Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 55 (Summer, 1977): 180-191.

⁶ Hazel R. McMahan, ed., "Stories of Early Oklahoma," unpublished manuscript, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁷ The discussion of the conflict between Creek freedmen and black immigrants is based in large part on Sigmund Sameth, "Creek Negroes: A Study of Race Relations," M.A. thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1940; *Lincoln Tribune*, September 17, 1904.

⁸ Washington, "Boley."

⁹ *Boley Progress*, April 19, July 13, 1906 and November 18, 1909; Ralph W. Tyler to Emmett Scott, Guthrie, Oklahoma, November 24, 1913, Booker T. Washington Papers, Library of Congress. Hereafter cited BTW.

¹⁰ Tyler to Booker T. Washington, Boley, Oklahoma, December 26, 1913; Washington to Scott, Castine, Maine, July 6, 1914, BTW.

¹¹ T.J. Elliot to Scott, Muskogee, Oklahoma, December 11, 1913, January 21, 1914, and June 22, 1914, BTW.

¹² David J. Turner to Scott, Boley, Oklahoma, September 8 1915, BTW. In 1914, for example, R.O. Gorman, W.L. Jones, and W. H. Dolphin, all of Boley, held important positions in the Oklahoma State Negro Business League.

¹³ *Clearview Patriarch*, September 5, 1914; For a detailed account of Alfred Sam's back-to-Africa movement and its impact in Oklahoma, see William E. Bittle and Gilbert Geis, *The Longest Way Home* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1964).

¹⁴ *National Negro Business League Report, 1914*, which Washington edited for publication, BTW.

¹⁵ William W. Bittle and Gilbert Geis, "Racial Self-Fulfillment and the Rise of an All-Negro Community in Oklahoma," *Phylon*, 18 (Third Quarter, 1957): 255; *Okemah Ledger*, August 31, 1911.