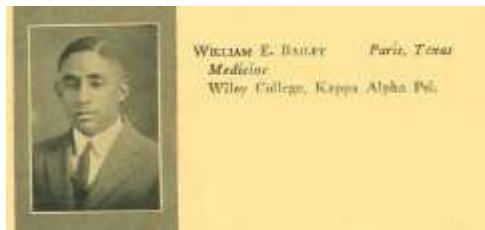


Discovering the Past: The Importance of African American History

Dorothy Gramberry, Geneva Miller Historical Society



We sometimes forget that the people who created the United States of America did this work within a particular historical context. That their creation was seen as an opportunity to realize a political union that extended equal rights to all men, many of whose grandfathers had not enjoyed such rights in Europe nor did they necessarily enjoy such in the New World. The extension of political rights to all men was quite a step from the divine

rights of kings and powerful lords.

The contradiction amidst this creation was the perpetual enslavement of a substantial portion (about 20% or so) of the diverse people residing in what became the United States of America. Thus the centuries-old struggle of Americans of African descent for full citizenship rights is the poster child for the fundamental ideas underpinning the political union known as the United States of America. This history is important to every American if the United States and its leadership are to fully understand how the country developed over time and the contributions of its diverse people in enabling the country's economic growth.

While African Americans, understandably want to know about their family origins and often see African American history as a means toward this end, there is a greater relevance to such family histories. These histories are often records of unrecorded societal events that provide insight into the ways in which existing social customs and mores affected the translation of fundamental American ideals into reality for all. A case in point, when a family researcher discovers parts of her/his family moved from Haywood County to Oklahoma, seeking and finding answers to the question of "Why did they leave?" not only provides potential information about what is occurring in the county during that time period but also adds additional information for interpretation of court records and other documents.

To further illustrate this last point, let's take a look at information provided by Bailey Family researcher, Ms. Charlene Epps. One of the sons of the Edmund Bailey family in the Prospect Community, Edward Walter Bailey, Sr., studied at Fisk University before 1890, taught at the newly developed Lane College in Jackson, TN and moved to Paris, TX around 1900. While in Paris he was the principal of Gibbons High School until his death in 1926. At his death, his body was brought back to Haywood County and buried at Prospect CME Church. By the 1930s his widow and children were living in Los Angeles, CA. Possible questions to explore – "Were opportunities greater in TX and other areas than in Haywood?"; "What educational/social/ business networks made it possible for Bailey to relocate to TX?"; and "Why is Bailey's body returned to Haywood County for burial?", etc.

Accompanying this article is a picture of Bailey's oldest boy, Edward Walter Bailey, Jr. who was a Sergeant Major in the U. S. Army during WWI and director of the 803rd Pioneer Infantry Band