A SHORT HISTORY OF THOMAS CHAPEL COMMUNITY

(St. Thomas AME Church, Cemetery and Public School)

Compiled by Vivian Toole Cates BS MEd

January 2013
A SHORT HISTORY OF THOMAS CHAPEL COMMUNITY
(St. Thomas AME Church, Cemetery and Public School)
Compiled by Vivian Toole Cates BS MEd

A few surviving records provide a very sketchy description of how the Thomas Chapel Community might have developed into a once thriving rural predominately black community in southwestern Cherokee County, Texas. The current generation, now into 2013, for a variety of reasons, has no records ready at hand of that earlier time period from the 1860’s to the early 1900’s. Some strong oral history traditions and family stories have survived in the minds of descendants of some of the early residents. Based on the limited surviving early records some of these strongly held opinions about the origins and development of Thomas Chapel do not match up very well. Such is the nature of most historical and genealogical research projects.

The legal description for the current seven acre property for St. Thomas Chapel AME Church listed with the Cherokee County Appraisal District in care of T. J. Ross, Alto, Texas is Abstract 4-A, Block 891, Tract 6 of the P. (Peter) E.(Ellis) Bean Survey, J 18. The surviving church and cemetery are about 4 miles west of the town of Alto. Alto, stop in Spanish, is a four way stop where U. S. Highway 69 N-S forms a cross roads with State Highway 21 E-W. About two miles west of the church still on Texas State Highway 21 West is the present day Caddo Indian Mounds State Historic Site and about a mile farther west is the Neches River Bridge.

For some unknown reason a deed to St. Thomas Chapel AME Church was not drawn up or recorded until the 1905-1906 time period. No reason is known why the church trustees at that time chose to sell off lots on the north and east side of the church property to other black residents of the area. The original deed reference in Cherokee County is Deed Book 36, Page 116. In addition to the present much improved church building, there is a small frame house in poor condition formerly used as a parsonage on the other side of the county road from the church building. The current church building was originally a wood frame structure set on a pier and beam foundation. The church property is bisected in a general north and south direction by a county road that joins the north side of S H 21 West to form an intersection. The road through the property is known locally as the Lynches Chapel Road. On the north side of Hwy 21 in front of the church property Raymond Ross, a life-long resident of the community now in his early 90’s has operated a scrap metal yard for most of his years, at least since the 1960’s.

Cherokee County Deed Book 36, Page 116. John McCrummen for himself and as attorney in fact for my children of the county of Lubbock and State of Texas. No price or donation is given. The condition is that the Trustees, not named, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Cherokee County, Texas, are to deliver to McCrummin a good and sufficient deed to 13 ½ acres of land in the P. E. Bean survey about 10 miles South of Rusk ...Beginning in the San Antonio Road 293 vrs N 58. E from the N. W. corner of the J. W. Foreman tract of land . . . . . . . Thence westwardly with said San Antonio road to the beginning
containing thirteen and one half acres of land more or less. Dated November 4, 1905. The signature of John McCrummen notarized at Lubbock, Texas by a Justice of the Peace L. M. Knight.

The wording of the above deed is somewhat unusual. One best guess would be that the purpose of the deed was to clear up the title of the land to the church because McCrummen apparently owned a large tract of land in the area. It has not been researched as to any other land he might have own. Nor has it been determined if this was where he lived. Mr. Crimmens (various spellings) had left the Cherokee County area and was still living in west Texas in 1905.

Cherokee County Deed Book 36, Page 186. Information is filled in on a preprinted deed form. Trustees of St. Thomas Chapel AME Church were Irwin Lockhart by mark, Sam Holcomb, Henry Carter by mark, Charlie Thompson, O. L. Bonner Pastor. Sell to Abe Smith, wife Silvia. Surveyed May 4, 1906, filed May 10, Recorded May 15th 1906.

Cherokee County Deed Book 36, Page 207. Filled in deed form. Dated May 5, 1906. The Trustees of St. Thomas Chapel A.M. E. Church were Irwin Lockhart, Sam Holcomb, Charlie Thompson, Henry Carter, all signing by mark X. Pastor in charge was O. L. Bonner For $10.00 Selling to Labe Lee and wife Matilda, north side of San Antonio Road, part of St. Thomas Chapel 13 ½ acres, 2 acres for $21.00. Legal description mentions Labe Lee’s corner. E. A. Watkins Surveyor. Filed June 13, 1906, Recorded July 24, 1906.

Cherokee County Deed Book 58, Page 403. Dated November 17, 1906. Deed is completely typed. No preprinted form was used. Trustees of St. Thomas AME Church. Irvin Lockhart, Sam Holcomb, Henry Carter, Mose Hamilton, Rev. O L. Bonner. Sell to Jiles Coupland for $10.00. Four miles S W from Alto on S. A. Road, part of St. Thomas Chapel Church 13 acre tract, mentions Abe Smith Corner. Surveyed by E. A. Watkins, November 10, 1906. Filed November 18, 1912, Recorded November 18, 1912.


As is true with present day deeds, unless the document is some type of loan or promissory note, the price mentioned in the legal instrument might not be the actual amount of money that changed hands. Some of the terms generally seen in deeds are some versions of “for $10.00 and other good and valuable considerations” or “for love and affection . . . . and other valuable considerations.”

No early documentation has been found on early structures. Only logical assumptions based on oral history can be made about what type of buildings were used on the property and when they would have been erected or torn down. Oral history claims there was once a lodge building for some sort of fraternal order and a two story school building. The stories get confused as to whether the school was held in the church or the church was held in the school or whether the school was held in the lodge building.
About 1937 another church named Williams Chapel was formed by members from St. Thomas Chapel AME who had moved into Alto or closer to New Hope, another predominately black community just north of the town Alto. Lack of transportation has been cited as the reason for forming the new church. Until the mid-1930’s sections of even the main roads like S H 21 West and 69 N-S were still unpaved. Members were still using farm wagons for transportation; some walked; few had cars. Eventually a substantial frame building was erected on a small plot of land on the west side of U. S 69 north of Alto near the New Hope Cemetery. Unfortunately the membership declined in the late 1900’s. The church was disbanded in 2006 and the building was torn down. Most of the active members recombined with Thomas Chapel.

Dates are somewhat “fuzzy” about when the current church building and the old parsonage were built. In the late 1970’s an addition was built on the east side of the church building for a fellowship hall and cafeteria. The pastor at that time was Rev. Daniel Emmanuel.

In November 1989 a mechanics lien for $8,500.00 was executed with Travis Smith doing business as Alto Butane for three five ton central heating and air conditioning units. At that time the church trustees were R. J. Ross, Milton Coleman, Britton Tilley and Lawrence Tilley. Cherokee County Deed Book 1091/338.

In 2000 the outside of the church building was bricked and other major repairs were made to the church including the entry porch. The pastor at that time was Rev. W. M. Vaughn, Sr.

Today Thomas Chapel’s population is down to a few people. Probably because of expenses and declining enrollment, the tax supported public school closed in the late 1950’s and consolidated with the black school in Alto, Booker T. Washington. BTW still has an active alumni organization. The church, subject of this sketch, is still viable with an active congregation. The cemetery is the only black cemetery known and still used in this section of Cherokee County.

Early county school records and surviving oral traditions do agree that Thomas Chapel was a thriving rural black community with an organized church, school, and cemetery well before 1900. At one time there was even a gas pump and a small store.

Cherokee County was formed in 1846 from Nacogdoches County when Texas became a state instead of a separate republic. Between 1846 and 1850 many families moved into the south western portion of Cherokee County along the El Cameo Real or the old San Antonio Road which eventually became Texas State Highway 21 West of Alto. Many of these families appear on the 1850 census of Cherokee County. Many of the settlers who came to this section of Cherokee County before the Civil War were slave owners.

Some heads of white families living in the vicinity in 1856 were W. C. Dawson, Wm. Shaw, David Hullum, Dial Peevy, J. W. Foreman, E. H. Baxter, John Boaz, John Henderson, J. Musick, Colbert and Buck Black, W. Y. Lacy, J. P. Williams, David Foreman, Cartwright Henderson, J. P. Henderson, and Alonzo Whaley. This list of names is from a list of Roads Overseers from Cherokee County for 1856.
Some of these names can be found as slave owners on the 1860 Slave Schedule of the 1860 census of Cherokee County, Texas. There was also a slave schedule for the 1850 Census.

Of special interest in 1860 is the listing of J. W. Foreman with 14 slaves in Household #53 and W. C. Dawson with 10 slaves in Household #52. W. C. Dawson was a farmer, born about 1818 in South Carolina. He had three sons, William A., James S. and Thomas J. by a first wife, Jane, daughter of William Shaw of Lacy’s Fort. He had a daughter, Martha J. G. by a second wife, Mrs. Martha Jasper whom he married in 1855. When W. C. Dawson died in Cherokee county, Texas, right after the 1860 census and before January 1861 his estate records named some of his slaves as two negro men, Manuel and Henry, a negro woman, Abby, and two other negroes, Mary and Harriet.

John W. Foreman was born 1802 in South Carolina, moved to Talladega County, Alabama, and then to this section of Cherokee County, Texas, before 1850 when he acquired several hundred acres of land on the south side of the San Antonio Road. Where his land is located on the land plats and where his family is listed on the various censuses definitely pinpoints the location of the Thomas Chapel Community in the 1800’s and 1900’s. All of the land on the south side of Texas State Highway 21 owned by the black residents of Thomas Chapel was sold to them by the Foreman heirs at various times after the Civil War in small acreage tracks. Many Foreman descendants still live in Cherokee County and in the East Texas area.

It is less clear exactly where John McCrummen (various spellings) actually lived though he did own a large tract of land on the north side of the San Antonio Road that apparently included the church property. John McCrimmon, presumed to be the “donor” of the church property, is shown in 1860 with 18 slaves, living in household #602 in Beat #3. His family is also on the 1850 census in Household #693. He and his wife Mary A. {_?_} were both born about 1821-23, he in North Carolina and she in Alabama. They were probably married somewhere in Alabama about 1839 and moved to Cherokee County just in time to be listed on the 1850 census. Their children were Daniel b. c. 1841, John S. b. c. 1843, Elizabeth b.c. 1845, Margaret Eveline b.c. 1847-48 and Jesse C., a son, b.c. December 1849; all born in Alabama. By 1860 all of the children listed in 1850 were still living and had been joined by three more children, Sarah M. b.c 1852; Wm. T. b. c. 1855, and Malcolm b. c. 1857.

By the 1870 Cherokee County census John McCrimmon was Household #41 in Beat 5. The two oldest sons had married with household of their own nearby and another child, Luther M. b. c. after the 1860 census had joined the family. Also living with the family were four young black males. Their occupation was listed as wof, an abbreviation used on the census for “working on farm.” Miles 21 b. TX, Rufus 18 and Grifford A. 17 both b. Ala. and Elbert Newton 26 b. Ms.

No extensive research has been done to date to determine if any of the later black residents of Thomas Chapel came from any of the slaves owned by the early white residents of the area. No oral histories are known to have been collected relating events back to slavery times in this area. Some family oral history stories and the 1870 and 1880 census records do indicate that black residents of Thomas Chapel moved to the area from other places after the Civil War.
The exact origins for the name St. Thomas Chapel is not known. One guess is that the origin might be in the given name of one of the local white land owners.

Parts of the St. Thomas Chapel AME cemetery are across the county road that bisects the property on the west side of the property where the last school building was located and parts of the cemetery are on the east side of the county road behind the church and parts are back into a wooded area towards the east side of the property. The well-kept cemetery is still being actively used for burials into the present year of 2013.

The exact age of the cemetery is not known. Most interested people will agree, after physically walking the cemetery, that the cemetery probably originally extended back up into a wooded area behind the church. There are probably many older graves back in that wooded area as claimed in oral tradition and stories perhaps even back into slavery times. Based strictly upon the general history of the area and a general understanding of how communities’ social institutions developed, it is definitely within logical probabilities that there may have been slave graves there from those times. This is especially true given that both John McCrummen who “cleared a title” to the church property in 1905-1906 and John W. Foreman on whose land the residential area of the Thomas Chapel Community developed were both slave owners. When deaths occurred, the remains needed to be buried somewhere.

By the very early 1850’s the Shiloh Methodist Church had been organized northwest of Alto and the white settlers began burying their deceased family members there including the John W. Foreman family. The mortality rate was especially high among young children and some of the earliest graves there were of infants and young children.

Mrs. Raymond Ross (Alizabeth) d. 2012 compiled an updated cemetery survey dated March 21, 1986. The earliest marked burial date is 1933. About half the five and a half pages of one column single spaced names have no marker dates. The list contains approximately 211 names. Surnames with and without markers listed in the survey are Blackshire, Ballard, Brown, Burleson, Carter, Crumby, Easley, Freeney, Hamilton, High, Hicks, Hickman, Holcombe, Hudson, Jones, Jorden(Jordan), Lee, Lewis, Lockheart, Lacy, Lofton, Land, Mickey, Mitchel, Morgan, Morrison, Palmer, Pope, Parker, Ross, Singletary, Simpson, Saddle, Scott, Skillern, Smith, Skinner, Thacker, Thompson, Tyler, William, White, Watson, Willis, Willie, White, Watson. Some names are just one listing and several have more than a dozen of that name.

The county school records from the old Cherokee County Public School Superintendent Office began about 1884. In Common School District No. 3 Cold Springs was the white school and St. Thomas Chapel was the black school. Some years the records were more complete than others. Teachers were not always paid on a regular basis. Total state and county funds for the fall of 1898 were $680 with $295.80 coming to Cold Springs and the rest to St. Thomas Chapel. For the term of 1900-01 the district had a total scholastic population of 140, 65 white and 75 colored, with $4.30 per student. There were more specific names mentioned in the early records for teachers and/or school trustees for St. Thomas than for Cold Springs.
As previously mentioned, for some unknown reason a deed to St. Thomas Chapel AME Church was not drawn up or recorded until the 1905-1906 period. Nor is any reason known as to why the church trustees chose to sell off lots on the north and east side of the church property to other black residents of the area. Since there was a St. Thomas Chapel black school listed in the old county school financial reports, there also had to have been some type of building in which school was held that would hold 75 students.

In 1915 two related white families, Dominy and Cates purchased a part of the John W. Foreman land on the south side of the San Antonio Road (S H 21 West) and purchased others tracts of land from other white owners on the north side of the San Antonio Road (S H 21 West). The families moved into the Thomas Chapel Community in December 1915. William Alexander Dominy and his wife, Charlotte Amelia Bradley and their three children; Mary Vera, Lizzie Iris, and William Glen Dominy, moved from Pennington on the Houston-Trinity County line between Crockett and Groveton. Mr. Dominy was looking for more acreage to farm along with his new son-in-law than he could obtain at Pennington at the time.

Mary Vera Dominy married John Early Cates on December 16, 1914. Their marriage was performed in the Dominy home at Pennington, Trinity County, Texas, and recorded in Angelina County, Texas. His Cates family had migrated from Alabama to the Kelts, Clawson, and Gann Cemetery area of northern Angelina County c. 1888-1889. The Dominys and Bradleys came to the Pennington area from other sections of Alabama after the Civil War. The couple had met when they attended Rusk Academy in Rusk. The Cates reared a family of nine children just to the east of the St. Thomas Chapel Church property. John Early Cates eventually, through a series of land sales from the original owners, came to own the lots sold off the east side of the church property by the church trustees in 1906.

The Cates and Dominy families did general farming with row crops and ran dairies, milking by hand until electric milking machines became available. Their farms provided seasonal work for many of the black residents of both Thomas Chapel and Weeping Mary Communities. The nine Cates children performed seasonal field work on the Cates land, hoeing cotton, alongside their black neighbors who were paid for their work. The formerly row cropped fields are now in pine timber and improved pastures for grazing beef cattle. The Dominy family still has one of the few remaining dairies in Cherokee County. Some of their Jerseys cows are descendants of cows that were brought from Pennington in 1915. The Cates family even had a store on the south side of SH 21 in the 1940’s.

The land surrounding the church property is now owned by Alto Investments, an entity formed by Gary Michael Dominy, the younger son of William Glen Dominy.

The youngest Cates child, Dan Bradley Cates, met his future wife while working as a professional forester for the U. S Forest Service in Tallahassee, Florida, in 1965. The couple married in Georgia in 1966 after the former Vivian Leigh Toole graduated from Florida State University. Dan was transferred with the U. S. Forest Service to Crockett, Texas, about 30 miles west of Alto in 1973. In 1979-1980 the couple built their home on Dan’s share of the Cates farm and moved with their two sons back to the Cold Springs Community.
In 1984-1985 Vivian Toole Cates researched an historical marker for the Cold Springs Methodist Church and Public School as a part of a graduate course in Local History at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches. The project turned into a 55 page monograph with extensive footnotes. Over 50 copies were eventually sold for a few dollars each to cover the cost of copying and binding. That research revealed extensive information on the early years of the St. Thomas Chapel Community that included citations to the black public school between 1884 and the early 1900’s. Mrs. Cates has had a lifelong avocation for doing local history and genealogy research on both hers and her husband’s family and for other people of like interest. Mrs. Cates is especially known for asking nosy questions that some people consider none of her business!

Since 1985 Mrs. Cates has made several unsuccessful efforts with various members of St. Thomas Chapel AME Church to obtain their interest in completing the process for obtaining an historical marker for the church, school, cemetery and community. Hopefully this cookbook project will be the push that is needed to get their congregation moving forward to finally obtain that goal.

Vivian Leigh Toole Cates (Mrs. Dan B. Cates)

“Mound Prairie Ranch”

2403 State Highway 21 West, Alto, Texas 75925-5706 http://www.myinu.net/vcates

Photographs of the St. Thomas Chapel A.M.E. Church and Cemetery

St. Thomas Chapel AME Church, Alto, TX, Vivian T. Cates, March 2013
View from St. Thomas Chapel AME Church yard showing houses in community, intersection of State Highway 21 West and county road, Lynches Chapel Road. Only about four houses are occupied now from a once much large community.  

Vivian T. Cates, March 2013

Newer part of St. Thomas Chapel Cemetery still in use  

Vivian Cates, March 2013
Back of St. Thomas Chapel AME Church showing part of cemetery  
Vivian T. Cates, March 2013

St. Thomas AME Chapel Church Cemetery across county road from parsonage. Dominy Dairy is in the background (upper right hand corner). The Old Dominy house was built c. 1927.  
Vivian T. Cates, March 2013
Another view from church yard showing cemetery section across the county road behind the old parsonage.  
Vivian T. Cates, March 2013

Gravestone at St. Thomas Chapel AME Church cemetery  
Vivian T. Cates, March 2013