Freeman Town: In search of a lost community

by Severo Avila, Features Editor
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There are no signs or plaques to mark where the small community of Freeman Town once stood.

But 150 years ago, an enterprising man by the name of William Thomas Freeman established a settlement on what is now Berry College property, where six black families would eventually live and flourish.

But since the acquisition of that land by Berry College, the Freeman Town community has been all but forgotten — its residents, culture and stories lost to history.

The only thing that remains is a neglected, overgrown cemetery.

There are some, however, who are trying to keep the memory of Freeman Town alive.

“We had gone out to do cemetery surveys on the Berry campus,” said Rebecca Henry, curator at the Martha Berry Museum. “I was appalled at the fact that basically no one on the Berry campus knows about this place. There’s no direct access to the cemetery. I wanted it to be
something people could see and hopefully get restored.”

So Henry began to dig up what information she could find about the long-forgotten community. She delved through the Berry College archives and pored over land records until she pieced together a rough history of Freeman Town.

The community was established in the mid to late 1860s by William Thomas Freeman, a slave who had escaped to fight for the North during the Civil War. He received his freedom after the war, Henry said.

His owner had moved to Rome and Henry believes Freeman returned to this area and purchased approximately 550 acres of land.

The land he purchased is in the middle of what is now Berry College property. All that’s left are the remnants of a cemetery at the end of Stretch road.

“From what we can tell, William leased the land out to six different families,” Henry said. “That was a big deal, particularly for an African American

during that time period.”

From the mid to late 1860s until Aug. 29, 1926, the Freeman Town community thrived.
Henry said the families that lived there — the Hendricks, Rogers, Montgomeries, Sanfords, Joneses and Maddoxes — were self-sufficient.

“We know that they had farms, homesteads, and a church which served as a schoolhouse,” she said. “They also had a blacksmith shop. William Thomas Freeman was the blacksmith.”

By 1926 when the Berry School acquired the land, Henry said only the older members of the community were living in Freeman Town. The younger generations, she said, had moved north to gain more freedom and to seek their fortunes.

Henry said in 1926 Martha Berry was just starting to build what is now the mountain campus. There was water on the Freeman Town property to which Berry wanted access and they wanted to build a road through the community.

“So the land was purchased from the descendants of William Thomas Freeman,” Henry said. “And that was the end of Freeman Town as we know it.”

While the community itself no longer exists, Henry said its history is an extremely important part of Rome’s heritage.

“It’s important because African American families in this time period were not well established,” she said. “For a community to come about that so was self-sufficient and so well established speaks to the strength of these families. This needs to be remembered.”

Rome residents can learn a little more about Freeman Town from a new exhibit at the Martha Berry Museum. Part of the museum’s “Erasing the Color Line” exhibit features a family tree as well as photographs and maps of Freeman Town. Several of the items once belonged to a woman called “Aunt Martha” who was William Thomas Freeman’s sister.

“She eventually ended up working for the Berry family as their cook and housekeeper,”
Henry said. “Because of that connection, we have some of her personal belongings at the museum.”

Patrice Shannon, interim director of Oak Hill and the Martha Berry Museum, agreed with Henry that Freeman Town’s history must not be allowed to fade with time.

“Although grave markers are the only things that remain of Freeman Town’s existence, it is not a forgotten place,” she said. “We produced this exhibit to revive this part of Berry’s history and to tell the story of the people who lived here. Freeman Town is a large part of Berry’s history and in turn Rome’s history. It is important to keep that history alive.”

The exhibit is also a starting point of sorts. Henry hopes that its existence will encourage area residents who have information or items relating to Freeman Town to come forth and share what they know.

If you have any information regarding the Freeman Town community, its residents or history, please call Rebecca Henry at 706-368-6705.

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