The Origin of Freemantown Cemetery
Johnny W. Riles III
for the Rome Area Bicentennial Commission
March 17, 1976

Annotated to Reflect Recent Research
July 20, 2013
Title of Report: The Origin of Freemantown Cemetery

Intern's Name: Johnny W. Riles III

Post Agency: Rome Area Bicentennial Commission

Purpose of Project:

1. To honor the people buried in the Post-Civil War Black Cemetery of Freemantown in the Bicentennial Celebration of Rome, Georgia.
2. Hopefully, to restore the Freemantown Cemetery into shape to be used as a historical site for Berry and the Floyd County area.
3. To illustrate the usefulness of including and recognizing the achievements of blacks in the Bicentennial celebration.

HIGHLIGHTS:

The highlights of my report were:

1. I discovered the history of Freemantown. (which was significant because no one knew enough about it to do so)
2. I discovered a map of the community and also where the Freemans originally came from.
3. I discovered that many people buried in the Freemantown cemetery have numerous descendants and relatives in Rome.
4. I was the first ever to clean the cemetery and then make a historical report on the community as well as the cemetery.
5. This historical report was done partly by oral interview and the memory of the people who were the last to leave Freemantown was amazing.
6. The descendants of those who were buried in Freemantown Cemetery - were visibly touched by the fact that I was doing research to honor their deceased people.

CONCLUSIONS:

Recommendations:

A. That the Governor's Intern Program aid and assist in the restoration of Freemantown Cemetery so that it could be used as a historical site.
   (This speaks primarily of funds to buy new posts, fences, and a commemorative stone which tells the significance of Freemantown Cemetery)

B. Offer a student an internship to get this restoration project completed by July 4, 1976.

C. That the agency send me some ways in which I can have this restoration project completed before the Bicentennial Celebration.

I have read this abstract and final report:

Agency Supervisor's Signature: 

Date: March 17, 1976
Introduction

It was a cold and windy day. Actually, it was no different in weather than any other day of January. With axe, slingblade and bush-hook in hand, I walked slowly over the practice track of Berry Academy toward the rusty iron gate of the cow pasture.

From the gate, I could see an old barn. Around the barn a few cows lazily strolled as if they were waiting for food. Entering the pasture, I slowly walked toward the barn. I looked to see if I could find any signs of the cemetery that I had been told was located behind the barn. Yet, I saw nothing of a cemetery, only the birds flying from the barn and a few cows staring at me, pleading, as if I was the guy who was bringing them food.

As I came closer to the barn many thoughts passed through my mind. If this post - Civil War black cemetery is of such historical importance, why did Berry build a cow pasture around it?" I thought also, at that time, I could not understand just what historical significance I would be able to find in a cemetery which everyone had forgotten or either knew very little of.

The sudden moo of a cow disrupted my thinking just as I was coming around the side of the barn. Then I was startled by a bird that flew low and quickly out of the barn. After my nerves were stable, I saw what I was looking for. Directly in front of me - fenced in by worn out posts and aging wire; covered by oak scrubs and briars that were four feet high and just as thick; - was the Old Black Post - Civil War Cemetery, Freemantown, Cemetery.

I could barely see any headstones due to the thickness of the brush that covered the cemetery. I even questioned if the fenced in area was a cemetery let alone the one which I was supposed to find.

So, hesitantly I walked to the fence threw my tools inside and carefully climbed over the fence. Before I picked up the bush axe to begin work, I thought, "where did this all begin?"
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PROJECT TITLE.................. Restoration of Freemantown Cemetery
INTERN......................... Johnny W. Riles III
HOST AGENCY..................... Rome Area Bicentennial Commission
APPOINTMENT DATE............. Winter Quarter - January 5, 1976 to
                             March 12, 1976
The Origin of Freemantown

The Freemantown Cemetery was the community graveyard of the inhabitants of Freemantown. Before discussing the cemetery at this time, let us look at the history of Freemantown.

The Freemantown community was started by William Thomas Freeman, an emancipated slave of John Freeman. William's master before he was emancipated, John Freeman had previously lived in Coweta County (Newnan, Georgia) and for reasons of his own moved to Rome. Along with his family and his slaves, John Freeman lived in the mountains on an area called Texas Valley.

John Freeman did not live in Texas Valley long and during the latter part of the 1870's he and his family moved to Rome. "Freeman Ferry" in Rome was named after this white family of Freemans. Nonetheless, before John Freeman moved out of Texas Valley he began the process which so many other slave owners in the South had to do - free the slaves. He made his newly emancipated slaves an offer: they could come with him to Rome where they would be a sort of 'live-in hired help' or either they could leave him and be free to do whatever they wanted to.

At first glance, this would appear to be a simple choice for the slaves to make, however, in a realistic observation of the South after the Civil War, the choice was extremely difficult to make. One must note that this was not too long after the Civil War known historically as the 'Era of Reconstruction.' During this period the South suffered acutely. In Georgia, specifically, the abandoned lands, the wasted lands which was reduced to nothing by General Sherman's 'March to the Sea,' the want of food and clothing, the thousands of displaced persons, and the absence of organized civil authority to cope with the emergency merely 'suggest' the significance of the choice John Freeman was offering his slaves. In fact, Blacks at this time were
distressed not only because they genuinely feared (especially after President Lincoln's death) that they would gradually slip back into a condition hardly better than that of slaves. Therefore, the slaves of John Freeman were choosing between life—the certainty of a white master caring and providing for them; or death—if they chose to be free yet could not provide for themselves or protect themselves from the numerous negative elements that were present at this time.

Some slaves accepted to live on with their former master John Freeman. However, others did not. The most significant of these slaves was William Thomas Freeman for whom the community, Freemantown, was named.

William T. Freeman was a Blacksmith by occupation. For a slave this was a highly specialized skill to learn. Especially, if one considers the fact that most slaves in the South were either field hands or house servants. Only in the rarest circumstances would a slave be allowed some form of authority or specialized skill. Not only that but an occupation such as a Blacksmith required a man of great physical endurance and patience. Thus, William Freeman was described as having the preceding human qualities.

Supported by such qualities and many others, William Freeman acquired an estimated five hundred and fifty acres of land after being set free. For an ex-slave in the deep South during the early 1880's this was no small feat. The question to be answered now is how did he acquire so much land?

This question is the most difficult to answer because the Deed Office at the Rome Court House only records land deeds from 1833 to the present. One should note that the transactions recorded from 1833 to the early 1900's are not that accurate. Also, an ex-slave's deed was usually written by the ordinary and the ex-slave signed it with a mark (an "X") because the majority of them could not write. Therefore, the ex-slave being unable to write could only tell
the ordinary what he was trying to do and sign what the ordinary wrote up for him. In addition, many of the transitions of the deeds of the Black Freeman Family were signed in the presence of the Sheriff or some official. Hastily, since one logically concludes that no recent ex-slave had enough money to acquire such a large area of land, I contend that William Freeman acquired most of his land through the help of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, better known as the Freedmen’s Bureau. The Bureau aided refugees and freedmen by furnishing supplies and medical services, establishing schools, supervising contracts between freedmen and their employers, and managing confiscated or abandoned lands, leasing and selling some of them to freedmen. On the other hand, William Freeman may have acquired the land in some other way, however, I honestly feel, supported by research done in the Deed’s Office in Rome, that the Freedmen’s Bureau helped William acquire the land. Nevertheless, it is a fact that he owned five hundred fifty acres of land located directly where the Berry Academy School is now.

More important to remember is that William Freeman knew the importance of owning land. For instance, on August 14, 1900 he bought 130 acres of land from James W. Selman, a black ex-slave who lived near the Freemantow town community. Thus, William Freeman knew well what it would take to insure a Black man’s livelihood—land.

After he acquired his land, William Freeman, eventually, fathered fourteen children: Essex, Josephine, Nick, Lindsey, William (Jr.), Mingo, Fanny, Henrietta, Emma, Bulah, Clinton, Ford, Thomas, and Fredonia. It was these fourteen children who formed the base of Freemantown and the land owned by William Freeman was divided among them.

Freemantown Community did not consist entirely of Freemans. There were six other families that helped to make up this small community: the Maddoxes,
the Hendricks, the Rogers, the Montgomerys, the Sanfords, and the Joneses. As it so happened, intermarriage into other families was common; therefore the later generations of these families are closely related or kin to one another.

Thus, it was from these families that the community, Freemantown, became a small thriving Black community just below the Lavendar Mountains.
Freemantown as a Thriving Community

Let us now look at the inhabitants of Freemantown in the sense of a community. What did the people do? What did they contribute to the community? These are the questions that are to be answered.

First, as any other rural black community during the 1880's to the early 1900's, the chief occupation among the inhabitants of Freemantown was farming. The majority of them grew food mainly to feed their families and not to sell.

The only other occupations that the inhabitants of Freemantown engaged in were (1) cutting wood to sell in town (This was to be used as fire wood and not lumber); (2) hunting game, and (3) mining for oil, gas or minerals. It may appear strange that ex-slaves would be interested in mining for oil, gas or minerals; however, William Freeman's sons, Lindsey and Nick bought land from their father so that they could engage in mining activities. Evidently, the Freemans were very industrious people.

Not only were they industrious but they were also proud to have their own land and way of life. One granddaughter of William Freeman, Mrs. Beatrice Battey, recalls with pride that: "No blacks in Freemantown ever did any work for whites. My grandfather, my father, my uncles and all of my relatives, owned their own land and worked for themselves."

However, there was one black woman who eventually came to work for whites. Her name was Martha Pearl Freeman. She was the younger sister of William T. Freeman. Martha worked as a personal maid to Miss Martha Berry, the Founder of the Berry Schools. Miss Berry thought very highly of 'Aunt' Martha (as she was called) and referred to 'Aunt' Martha in many of her writings as well as among her many associates. It would appear that Martha Freeman or - if you will - 'Aunt' Martha was loved very much by the Founder of the Berry Schools. Martha Pearl Freeman lived to be one hundred and seven years old. Also, according to relatives who remember her, she was a strong, no nonsense, black woman.
Freemantown had a church called Freemantown Baptist Church. The first pastor was the oldest son of William Freeman, Rev. Essex A. Freeman. After his death, he was replaced by a Rev. Brantley. The constituents of Freemantown were very religiously orientated. Even the descendants of this community hold strong nostalgic feelings for the church. In fact, the church was the only official place designated for a gathering of all the people. It was there that they got a chance to socialize with the other members of Freemantown. It was there, also, where they developed a sense of unity and friendship as well as the belief that there is a God who cares for them and watches over them.

The church served also as a school. Freemantown School taught only general subjects and was open to anyone who wanted to or who could afford to come to it. The teachers were Jim and E. P. Jones. Jim Jones was the first teacher and he married into the Freeman family. E. P. Jones came to be the last and longest teacher.

Next, all shopping was done in Rome. It usually took them a half a day to go to the store and return. Usually, they didn’t need to go to the store for anything except spices because everything else was made at home.

Subsequently, other than the ones already mentioned, no significant events happened. The exact date of the origin of Freemantown cannot be pin-pointed. Yet we do know that here was a community of black ex-slaves living their lives happily, proudly and responsibly during and after the Reconstruction Era.

Yes, a community that was related not only in blood and skin color, but also in heart and in progress—a community that causes the descendants of it to glow with pride over it. Perhaps, the exact date of the origin of Freemantown is not important but rather the fact that it did exist and it was an extraordinary community (since the blacks were so well off). Although the date of its origin cannot accurately be pin-pointed, the decrease and end can be.
The Decline of Freemantown Community

There are many reasons for the end of Freemantown as a thriving community. The main reason was that the Berry Schools bought the land from the inhabitants. There were some of the descendants of Freemantown families who contend that the Berry Schools forced these blacks off their land as well as not pay them what the land was worth.

However, the granddaughter of William Freeman, Mrs. Beatrice Freeman Battey, states that: "the people (we) were not forced off the land. All the young people or most, I should say, of Freemantown had left to go to the North or elsewhere, so only the elderly remained. The community died of its own weight and everyone (we) decided it was best to sell."

Thus, within twenty-six years into 1900, the last inhabitants of Freemantown sold all their land on the same day, August twenty-ninth, nineteen-hundred and twenty-six (8-29-1926). As they sold their land, they took only their possessions, their memory of the lives they lived at Freemantown, and the hope that their new life started elsewhere now would be better. As the last inhabitants left a few days after they sold their land, they looked back - and all that was left was a cemetery....

While the last land sale did take place in 1926, members of the family began selling land to the Berry Schools as early as 1916.
All That Was Left - A Cemetery

Originally, Freemantown Cemetery was the private cemetery for the Freeman Family. It was located on the lot of Sanford P. Freeman, brother of William Freeman. As the community grew and the other families intermarried with the Freemans it soon became the cemetery for the entire Freemantown community. The cemetery was bought by the Berry Schools from Suzie Freeman on August 29, 1926. Descendants of Freemantown claim that Martha Berry agreed to allow them the use of the cemetery to bury their relatives or whoever wanted to be buried in the cemetery. In contrast, they contend that whenever they tried to contact her concerning the matter, she could not be found or she claimed that the road leading to the cemetery was too bad for travel. I cannot help but feel there is some validity to what they say; however, the truth of the matter cannot be judged because Miss Berry is not here to defend herself against such accusations.

Accordingly, the last person to be buried in the Freemantown cemetery was Mingo Freeman. The cemetery contains nearly all of the early inhabitants of Freemantown. However, due to the years and the weather many of the headstones are either illegible or they are covered beneath the ground. Still, some of the headstones can be read and one can see by the type of headstone they these people were distinguished members of the community.

Is it really important to know everyone, individually, buried in Freemantown Cemetery? No, I think not. In a deeper sense, it is more important to realize that this cemetery contains the earthly remains of black men and women who lived during and after slavery, that the people buried here were thrifty, hardworking and dedicated; that the people buried here saw life at its worst and still survived to see life at its best and to die peacefully.
Perhaps, they never made the history books. Maybe, because they didn't contribute anything that man considers significant to mankind.

On the other hand, perhaps they did contribute an ideology (by living it) for blacks to follow: (1) acquire your own land; (2) work hard for what you get; (3) take care of and love your family and neighbors; (4) support yourself as much as possible; and (5) thank God for the little that you do have.

The inhabitants of Freemantown must be honored because they survived a period which was the worst in Southern history. They should be honored because they not only survived; but they grew, prospered, and then died peacefully.

From the shackles of slavery, through the pains, hostilities, and severity of the Civil War and then reconstruction, to the blissful quietness of death, those buried in Freemantown cemetery made a great contribution, indeed; even if all that was left was a cemetery.
Conclusion

The last patch of briars fell before my bush axe. The job was finished. Flowers already began to sprout throughout the cemetery to give it the appearance of archaic splendor. The cemetery was visible from front to back and from side to side. I could hardly believe that I completed it all by myself.

I thought of all the research; all the interviews; and all the tedious work put into this project and I smiled. For some strange reason, I actually appreciated this cemetery. It gave me the opportunity to realize that to honor history one must be ever mindful of the people who do not make the history books. For it is these people who really contributed to history by etching out their ordinary lives and living to be praised by God and not by man.

As I climbed over the fence to leave for the final time - I did something, which many people would consider silly, I said to all the graves in the cemetery, "God Bless You."

The Spring season was slowly coming in, already the branches was sprouting everywhere. Something had sprouted in my heart ....humility and pride.
Bibliography

Frasier, E. Franklin. *From Slavery to Freedom.*

Acknowledgements

(People interviewed and questioned about cemetery and Freemantown Community)

1. Dr. Inez Henry
2. Mrs. Jose Rogers
3. Mrs. Jose Franklin
4. Mrs. Mary Nell Darlo
5. Mr. Artis Johnson
6. Mrs. Annie A. Johnson
7. Mr. M. Johnson
8. Mr. Clarence Montgomery
9. Mrs. Beatrice Freeman Battey
10. Mrs. Addie Galloway
11. Mr. Sam Burrell
12. Mr. Walter Johnson
13. Mr. John R. Bertrand
14. Mr. Lance Ingram, Jr.
15. Mrs. Joyce Morris
16. Mr. John Clemmons
17. Mr. Sam Otts
18. Floyd County Deed Office