

We have often discussed the need for reparations for the 400 years of slavery. The contexts of the discussions continue on as if we never had a chance with any form of reparations. I discovered back in the 1990's that we indeed had a go with a form of reparations. The biggest problem was that we did not adequately exploit it nor pass it on to following generations.

My curiosity got going when I read up on the first Black congressionally elected officials. They were elected as part of the Reconstruction following the Civil War. One of these giants was Senator Blanche Bruce from Mississippi. People don't talk much about these trailblazers as they were all Republicans – like that has a negative meaning. Senator Bruce during his short tenure ensured that all freed slaves became immediately eligible for the Homestead Act of 1862 which provided immense opportunity for land ownership and wealth building. In reading up on the Homestead Act, I found that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), a division of the Department of Interior, kept good records on all activity relating to this program.

This program was a “game changer”. Any American citizen could identify government owned land, apply for a claim and then receive the property providing they would live on it and work it (usually farming). More than half the nation was applicable and it was meant to generate population and economic growth. This was applicable to freed Blacks also. I decided to probe deeper. Be careful of what you ask; you may get it. I contacted the BLM and asked for a formal briefing. They set up a meeting with me in Lorton, Virginia and gave me a great overview.

Then the Deputy Secretary asked if my people were from the South. I informed him that my people evolved from Bossier Parrish, Louisiana. They declared that someone in my family benefited from the Homestead Act. I challenged him on that. He asked, “Give me one of your grandfather's name”. I stated “Thomas Harry Alford. He put the name into their very elaborate database and instantly it “hit”. “Thomas H. Alford received a land grant for 160 acres on March 20, 1916”. I was shocked and my first reaction was that my grandfather had 40 acres, not 160, or so we all thought.

I walked out of there with a photo copy of the deed and a whole different mindset on the history of my people. A trip to the courthouse in Bossier Parrish, LA was in order to verify all of this. I arrived at the Benton, LA courthouse ready to spend hours researching this “controversy”. Sure enough shortly after the date on the deed an entry was found, “Thomas H. and Fannie Alford awarded 160 acres from the US Government”. However, two lines later “Thomas H. and Fannie Alford transfer 120 acres to Mr. Roos”. In my shock I went to the clerk for an explanation.

She chuckled and then said, "It looks like Ol' Man Roos got to your granddaddy". She then went on to explain that what I had just detected was one act of some of the greatest land racketeering which prevailed throughout the South. She said, "Follow all activity by Roos and see how he legally connived land from Black folks". You see my grandparents were illiterate like most Blacks down South. He, and others like him, would approach them and inform them that he could get them free land. Yes, he would make a claim and apply in their name for 160 acres at a time. When it was approved he would give them 40 acres and take 120 acres for himself.

This guy made a fortune doing this. He would even have a strategy of picking up these 120 acre clumps so that they would be contiguous and he, in the end, would have giant masses of land to develop and flip for big money. All this at the expense of my grandparents and many, many others who had a great opportunity before them but couldn't get the right technical assistance or governmental follow through.

I showed my relatives the documentation and they became angry at me as if I let it happen (kill the messenger). This program lasted for decades and could have taken Blacks to another level of economic power and self-sufficiency. However, this great opportunity came before us and we just couldn't pull it off.

A few Blacks were educated enough to take advantage of the program. They would become prominent land owners and community leaders. Also, they would become targets for those envious of their acumen and newly claimed power. Life would not be easy as someone was trying to take that land at every opportunity. Many would soon lose what they had earlier won.

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