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### **Brief Histories of Dearfield and the Dearfield Dream Project**

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## **Brief Histories of Dearfield and the Dearfield Dream Project**

### **Dearfield: An Early 20th Century African-American Farm Colony and Townsite in Weld County, Colorado**

Dearfield was an unincorporated town in Weld County, Colorado, from 1910 through the late 1930s. It was founded in 1910 by Oliver Toussaint Jackson, an African American businessman and entrepreneur who purchased and homesteaded land used for establishing the town-site under the Desert Land (1877) extension of the earlier American Homestead Act of 1862. Within a few years of its founding, the town of Dearfield was part of an extensive agricultural colony of mostly African American farmers and ranchers. Jackson's vision in founding the town-site and colony was inspired by Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (1877), who viewed himself as a political and social realist, and advocated a middle-ground approach for achieving African-American economic self-sufficiency and social advancement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Dearfield colony represented, in the words of historian Quintard Taylor, "the last major attempt at [African-American] agricultural colonization on the high plains", following a long history of such efforts from the Antebellum era through World War I and including such well-known towns as New Philadelphia (Illinois), Nicodemus (Kansas), and Booker (Texas). By 1915, Jackson informed a writer for the magazine Western Farm Life that the Dearfield Colony and town-site had 27 families, 44 wood-framed houses, a concrete block factory, a lodge hall, restaurant, grocery store, and boarding house with 595 acres in cropland (Ford 2007; Frederick 1915). Only a few years after founding of the Dearfield town-site, a second colony town of Chapelton, four and a half miles southeast of Dearfield was formally established in 1914 and, between 1914 and 1922, grew to rival and even exceed the importance of Dearfield itself, gaining the colony's only official U.S. Post Office, official county school, and at least three churches between 1914 and 1920. By 1916, During that time, Chapelton was home to the colony's first (and only) official U.S. post office (1917) and official Weld County public school (1919). By 1918, Chapelton-based churches both outnumbered and appear to have had larger more active memberships than those in Dearfield.

Between 1917 and 1918, with high crop prices associated with American participation in World War I, the Dearfield colony, or as it was sometimes referred to, the Dearfield Settlement, had, according to O.T. Jackson promotional literature, reached its "economic zenith" with marketable crops valued at \$50,000, residents belonging to 60 families, and 20,000 acres of associated agricultural land, much of that land homesteaded under the 1862 Homestead and Desert Land Acts. Between 1919 and 1923, the colony, including its two small towns, held between 150 and 300 residents and the town of Dearfield is said to have contained more than two dozen wood-frame homes, two churches, a school, a blacksmith's shop, general store, dance hall, a café known as the "Lunchroom", a filling station, a post office, and a small cement block factory. 1920 U.S. Census records on the colony showed its citizens came from diverse national and international origins, originating in 21 U.S. states and Mexico but also showed its African American population was smaller than stated earlier by Jackson, with 28 households and 96 members in those households. The dynamism of early Dearfield is illustrated by local collective road building and maintenance by Dearfield residents, fielding a local African-American baseball team which played other small town teams in its area, the holding of annual community fairs and rodeos, and establishment of a school under the newly created Chapelton School District (124) at Chapelton in 1919. Due to higher-than-normal rainfall before and during World War I, Dearfield residents who homesteaded or purchased farmland in the town's vicinity prospered, raising wheat, corn, sugar beets, and vegetables. The town's economic prosperity declined and then ended with increasingly severe drought in the mid-1920s and arrival of severe "dust bowl" drought conditions of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

O.T. Jackson, the ever-active promoter and entrepreneur of the Dearfield Colony and townsite, attempted to prevent their gradual decline after World War I when sharp reductions in post-war farm prices threatened the colony's welfare, advertising it as a "Valley Resort" for hunting, fishing, and week-end recreation for Denver's African-American population. A flyer for the "resort", distributed between 1919 and 1921, advertised its proximity to the South Platte River for hunting pheasants and deer, fishing, and enjoying week-end dances held at its Barn Pavilion dance hall, with meals available in the local Lunchroom Café and rooms available at the Dearfield Lodge. Many Denver African Americans traveled to Dearfield for week-end entertainment by train, disembarking at the nearby Masters Railroad Depot. By the early 1920s, Chapelton's star was also rapidly fading. Its U.S. Post Office closed on June 15, 1922, followed soon after by closure of the Chapelton-based Weld County school the same year. By 1930, Dearfield had become a virtual ghost-town and the colony had lost more than 70% of its African American inhabitants, with the 1930 Census showing the presence of only 10 households and 25 residents living in those households. During the mid-late 1920s, many Dearfield residents re-located to Denver's Five Points neighborhood and formed the core of a vibrant African American community which exists to the present day.

### **The Dearfield Dream Project**

The Dearfield Dream Project is a collaborative research and historic sites preservation program which builds on earlier work by the Black American West Museum and scholars from the City of Greeley Museums, University of Northern Colorado, University of Colorado (Boulder), Colorado State University, and earlier grant-funded private historical resource consultants. The project emphasizes archaeological, historical, and environmental studies and historic buildings protection and preservation regarding the early 20th Century African-American colony of Dearfield, an area of 20 square miles, located between 24 and 29 miles east of Greeley, Colorado, and between U.S. Highway 34 on the north and Interstate 76 on the south. Project research over the past decade has included archaeological and remote sensing (cesium magnetometry and ground-penetrating radar) surveys, excavations and laboratory analysis of artifacts and building remains at the original founding colony town-site of Dearfield along with archival and historical document and photograph studies, all designed to generate new interdisciplinary knowledge, and build a master archival data base on Dearfield's social, economic, political, and environmental history. Field surveys in colony areas outside the Dearfield town-site in 2011, 2012 and 2013 resulted in discovery of building foundations belonging to a second poorly known colony town of Chapelton and locations and building remains of some of its original farm homesteads, including that of the colony physician, Dr. Wade Jones. Archaeological field programs at the townsite of Dearfield took place in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2020. New archaeological field studies are planned for June 2021. Archaeological research is highly interdisciplinary in nature, including not only standard excavation methods but also geophysics (ground penetrating radar and cesium magnetometry), 3-D laser scanning of Dearfield buildings, and high-resolution drone (UAV) photo-mapping of the site. Historic and archaeological data bases, publications, and public and professional conference presentations resulting from project research are being used to construct firm foundations for future studies of the colony and its town-sites and better understanding of its historic role in early African-American social justice and economic self-sufficiency movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Colorado, its region, and the nation, emphasizing the colony's historic role in reflecting and engagement with social, economic, and political discrimination and environmental ["dust-bowl" climate change] issues leading to modern times.

The Dearfield Dream Project is an outgrowth of collaborative efforts by the Greeley-based Dearfield Committee, formed in 2008 to: 1) preserve the Dearfield town site as an important Colorado and national historical and heritage resource, 2) increase knowledge and appreciation of Dearfield's contribution to African-American efforts toward social and economic self-sufficiency between the civil war and WWII, and 3) communicate lessons of the Dearfield experience to Colorado and American public and school children of all ages and backgrounds as an inspiring example of African-American

efforts in achieving their hopes and aspirations of economic security, self-sufficiency and social justice. The Dearfield Committee serves as an advisory group to Denver's Black American West Museum and its committee members represent several public and private organizations, including the Black American West Museum, Weld County government, the University of Northern Colorado, the City of Greeley Museums, Colorado State University, Colorado Preservation, Inc., the City of Greeley, and Weld County Government. Other affiliated partners and project supporters not formally part of the Dearfield Committee include the Great Plains Studies Institute (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), the University of Colorado, and U.S. Senator Michael Bennet.