

African American History in Kendall County – Boerne “Flats” By John Benedict

People have asked me, about the history of the African Americans that moved into the area of Boerne known as “The Flats” and what happened to them? I will tell you what I know of the lives of these first African Americans in Kendall County. They began moving off their farms and into the Boerne Flats about 1900. Most of those who moved to the Flats were from the Freedom Colonies here in Kendall and nearby counties.

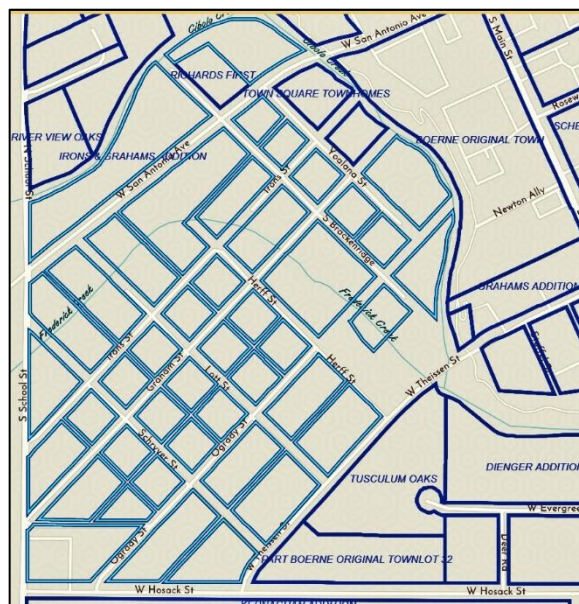
We know many of these folks also moved out of Boerne and Kendall County, looking for better living conditions, jobs, churches, and schools to educate their children—they had hopes and dreams. High on their list was a nicer home of their own and a welcoming community to live in. I know this from conversations and correspondence with the descendants of these first Kendall County African American families, some of whom grew up in the Flats.

The Boerne Flats started as the “Irons’ and Graham’s Addition” in 1887. It was about 65 acres in size and was divided into the streets and lots, much as you see today, bordered by Theisen, Hosack, and School streets and the Cibolo Creek. Until 1887, it was undeveloped land in southwest corner of the original 1852 Boerne plat.

Based on deed records, the first purchases of land in the Flats by African American began about 1900. By 1930, the US Census records list 18 homes in the Flats that were owned or rented by African American families. This census shows perhaps 43 African Americans living in the Flats. It was a mixed community of African Americans, Mexicans, English, Irish, and Germans. One frequent visitor to her African American friends in the Flats was a white child named Dianne (*nee* Davis) Taylor. She said that in the 1950s and earlier, there was a church and school in the Flats for the African Americans. Family names of these folks living in the Flats are listed in the 1930 census as, Blair, Brody, City, Coleman, Davis, Ferrell, Hemphill, Houston, Street, Washington, Warren, and Wren.



Royal School Students, Circa 1920



Map of the Boerne Flats shown in light blue

Also living in the Flats during this time was a young white girl named Mildred Frankie Davis (born May 12, 1924) and her family. Her friends called her “Frankie.” She wrote a wonderful book about her life, and what it was like growing up in the Flats. Her dad, Frank Davis, and mom, Emelie (*nee* Davenport), had purchased Doctor W. T. Reeves’ (1849-1922) estate after he died. The Reeves house was built about 1902. The estate consisted of a nice 2-story home, water well, three car garage, and 29 empty lots in the Flats, about 10 acres in total. The

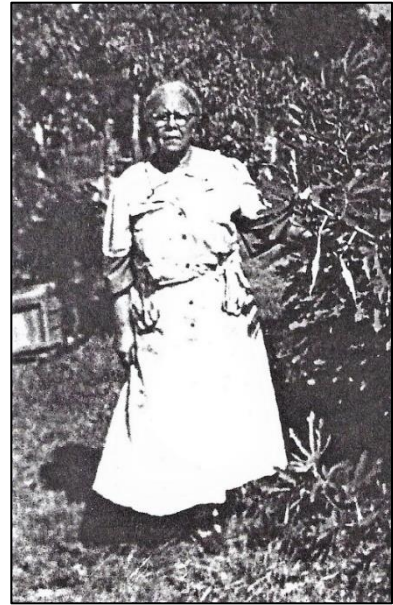
old Reeves home was located at 402 Herff St. where it meets O’Grady St. (see home number 1 on the map located on the last page of this article).



Malinda “Tillie” (Wren) Raborn.
Photo provided by Dianne Taylor.

Living just behind the Davis’ home was one of Charlotte Wren’s daughters, Malinda “Tillie” Wren (1888-1969) (left), who was married to David Raborn. Tillie lived at 408 O’Grady St. across O’Grady St. from her sister, Emma (Wren) Ferrell (1876-1966) (right) who had married Ben Ferrell (1870-1946).

Just east of them at 406 Lott St. lived another sister, Ida Wren (1868-1950) (bottom left), who married William M. Davis (1861-1933) (no relationship to Frank Davis). Ida had worked as a nurse and midwife for Drs. W.T. Reeve and J. F. Nooe. She retired about 1920. Dr. Reeve was the second Mayor of Boerne beginning in 1911.



Emma (Wren) Ferrell
Photo provided by Dianne Taylor.

Charlotte Wren (lower right)

had moved off her Spring Creek Rd. homestead, where the Wrenn Cemetery is located, sometime around 1910 based on the US Census. In 1914 she purchased lot 136, at 518 O’Grady St. from C.W. Bergmann. This was in the Flats close to some of her adult children and their growing families. She was a wonderful mother—providing support and love for her 18 children and 57 grandchildren.



Ida Wren Davis

Frankie Davis said her favorite childhood neighbors growing up were the African Americans, especially Aunt Charlotte Wren (1848-1940), her daughter Aunt Ida (Wen) Davis (1868-1950) and Ida’s daughters, Hattie (1887-1954) and Jenette “Nettie” (Wren) Davis (1907-1997), and Adam Warren (1870-1954). In her book Frankie says, *“Some people are important markers in our landscape of life. They add weight to our sense of place and belonging. These neighbors were very meaningful people to me.... We children were taught to call these women ‘Aunt’ out of respect to them.... ‘Aunt Ida’ had retired from nursing.*



Charlotte Wren

Her home faced our fields and had a large front porch which ‘Aunt Ida’ enjoyed most days. When I was little and Mama had to help Papa in the fields, she would take me to ‘Aunt Ida’s’ and she would watch me for Mama and in turn she was supplied with fresh vegetables during summer months. I did love those people who called me “Baby”. Their children were my playmates.... I once asked ‘Aunt Ida’ why she had black skin and my skin was white. She told me God liked to have flowers in his garden and so he made people different colors. Sounded good to me!!!.... I learned about slavery from ‘Aunt Charlotte’. She was a beautiful person and told me a lot about the trials of her life as a slave.”

Frankie Davis writes about her friend Adam Warren, *“Adam had a wagon that was pulled by two dray horses. I was the only person Adam would let drive his team. I was very proud that I was the only*

one allowed that privilege. Especially since I was only about 11 or 12 years old at the time.” The children loved riding on the tail gate of his wagon. Adam earned his living farming, selling vegetables, and as a teamster and charcoal producer, as well as doing odd jobs. He built his own house in the Flats close to the Frank Davis home. Adam was well respected throughout Boerne.

Dianne Taylor, a white Boerne resident whose family has been in Kendall County for many generations also mentions that Adam Warren did odd jobs for the community and “If someone wanted to pay him for a job he did, he would say, “I don’t need any money today.” During droughts, the community could get clear fresh water from his well. And in the days of the depression, he provided vegetables to many families in Boerne—a kindhearted person.

Dianne grew-up being cared for by Frankie (Thomas) Ferrell (1903-1985) (right). Frankie’s parents were Ben and Nina Thomas living at 500 O’Grady Street. Frankie was a cook, maid, caregiver,



Frankie Ferrell (1903-1985)

chauffer, and friend to Dianne and her family. Under Frankie’s care, Dianne spent many days in the Flats with the African American families—their children were her playmates. Dianne has fond memories of attending Sunday services in the Mt. Nebo Baptist Church in the Flats with Frankie. The church was located at 503 W. Graham St., today it is a remodeled home. In the early years Dianne’s grandmother was a member and treasurer of the Methodist Church in Boerne and she encouraged her church to give some of their old pews and piano to the Mt. Nebo Baptist Church.



**Former Mount Nebo Church,
Now a Residence at 503 W. Graham Street**

Frankie and her husband Eugene “Buddy” Ferrell lived at 518 W. Graham Street. Buddy was the son of Emma Wren and Benjamin

Ferrell. He grew up in the Flats. They had adopted two children, Louise and Willie “Bubba.” Louise became a nurse and moved to Lubbock. These children were the last young children in the neighborhood in the 1950’s and 60’s. They are thought to be the last to use the Royal School.

Frankie Ferrell would drive up to Dianne’s home just north of Boerne, early in the morning 6 days a week, and spend the day cleaning house, doing laundry, fixing meals, telling stories, and chauffeuring Dianne to various activities. Frankie even chauffeured Dianne and her mother on a vacation. Whenever Dianne had a challenge in life, she called on Frankie. Dianne said Frankie’s sister-in-law, Pearl Ferrell (another of Emma’s children) made the best lemon pies and when Dianne had her first baby, she asked Frankie to come help her care for the baby and to please bring Pearl and her lemon pies!



**Royal School as it looks today at the
corner of O’Grady and Hosack**

Frankie cared for Dianne from the age of 4 to 24. Dianne told me she loved Frankie deeply, like you would your mother, and Dianne still does.

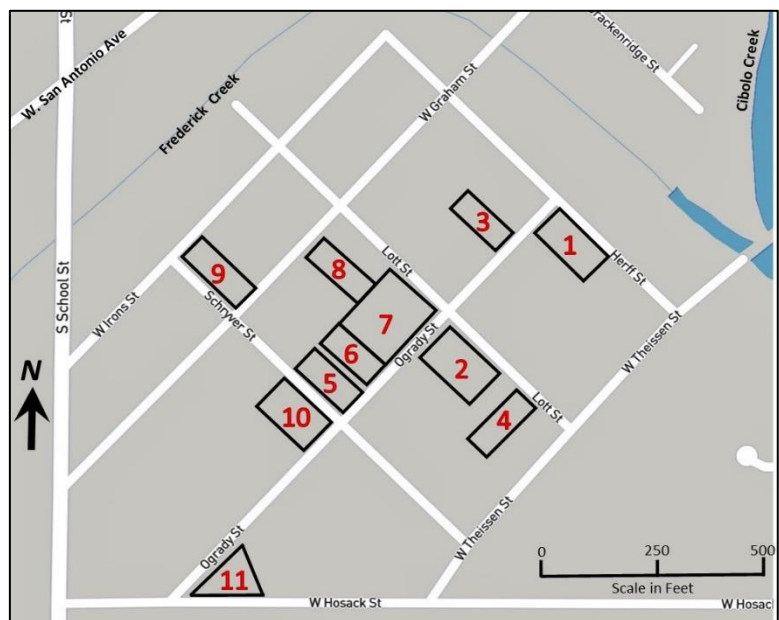
The US Census records suggest the homes of the African American families in the Flats were close together, mostly on W. Graham and O'Grady Streets, as best I can determine. The census also lists the dollar value of their homes. In 1930 their values ranged from \$250 dollars for Adam Warren's home, to \$1000 for Charlotte Wren's home. Dr. Reese's old home that Frank and Emelia Davis bought was valued at \$4,000. Between 1900 and 1920 the lots typically were purchased for about \$200 each based on county deed records. E. Z. Wren had purchased several vacant lots sometime before 1910 and sold some of them to his family. Frank Davis sold some of his lots to the African Americans too, lots he had acquired when he purchased the Dr. Reeve estate.

By the 1930 census Charlotte's husband Alex (1838-1922) had died, she had sold the old Wren homestead on Spring Creek Road, and was living in her Flats home thought to be located at 518 O'Grady Street. At this time, she was 84, head of household, working as a laundry woman, and she had her son, Grant Wren, living with her and a boarder, Perry Houston, as well as two teen age grandchildren, Charles O'Neal Wren and Christian Wren. She was a very dedicated mother!

The African Americans in the Flats built or acquired the buildings for the Royal School, located at 623 W. O'Grady St., and the Mt. Nebo Baptist Church. I have been told the City helped with the school building and paying for teachers. The African American community helped by providing housing for some of the teachers. Dianne Taylor said, at least one teacher lived with the Buddy and Frankie Ferrell family at 518 W. Graham St. during the week and returned home to San Antonio on weekends. The Ferrell's had built a bedroom addition to their house for the teacher to stay in during the week.

One of the last African Americans living in the Flats was Jewell "Sandy" Benson, and he is also distinguished as the last person to be buried in the Historic Wren Cemetery in 1999. Sandy was born in Comfort in the African American Colony there. He married Jenette "Nettie" Davis who grew up in the Flats as the youngest of 11 children born to William Davis and Ida Wren. Sandy's death marks the end of the story of the African Americans that made Boerne their home. Today the descendants of these historic Kendall County families are spread across America, as are so many of the first Kendall County families.

For more information on the Wren Cemetery and the history of first African American families in Kendall and surround counties see pages 79-94 in: <https://hcarcheology.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2019AncientEchoesJournal-reduced-size.pdf>



Map of the Flats with approximate locations of families, church, and school. 1, Frank and Emilie (*nee* Davenport) Davis; 2, David & Tillie (Wren) Raborn; 3, Eugene & Emma (Wren) Ferrell; 4, William & Ida (Wren) Davis; 5, Charlotte Wren; 6, Jewell and Jenette "Nettie" (Davis) Wren-Benson; 7, Adam & Hattie (City) Wren-Warren; 8, Mt. Nebo Baptist Church; 9, Eugene & Frankie (Thomas) Ferrell; 10, Ben & Nina (Given) Thomas; and 11, Royal School.