

1906 McFaddin Ave Episode 3: Transcript

Continuing the Conversation Beyond Black History Month: The Complexities of Race in Texas 1830 – 1877

KT: Hello, and welcome to 1906 McFaddin Ave!

I'm Kara Timberlake, Communications/Marketing Manager.

RH: And I'm Rayanna Hoeft, the director of educational programming.

KT: We are excited to delve into a series spotlighting African American history not only at the McFaddin-Ward House but also in Southeast Texas. For our first episode of the series, we're going to discuss the history and meaning behind Black History Month, and we have a special guest joining us so stay tuned.

Music

KT: The acknowledgement of African Americans' contributions to the American story came to be in 1925 when Historian Carter G. Woodson sought to raise awareness of this neglected part of history. The hope was to provide resources for teachers. Unfortunately, just like early 20th century society, history was segregated as well. Prior to World War II, many academics focused on the celebratory stories of the White man, which offered a one-sided perspective on our nation's story. According to the Library of Congress, the response to Woodson's acknowledgment in 1925 was overwhelming, crossing racial lines as both Black and White educators, philanthropists, and general members of the public wanted to know more.

RH: In 1976, President Ford recognized the importance of seizing "the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history." The celebration of Black history was expanded from a weeklong acknowledgment to encompass the entire month of February as part of the nation's bicentennial celebration, So, why February? That's when both Abraham Lincoln's and Frederick Douglas' birthdays fall.

The United States recognizes multiple heritage months. In March, we recognize Women's History Month; in April it's Arab American Heritage Month; in May it's Asian Pacific Islander American Heritage Month; in September we recognize Hispanic Heritage Month; in October it's LGBTQ+ Heritage Month; in November we celebrate Native American Heritage Month.

KT: The McFaddin-Ward House acknowledges the contributions the African American community not only made to our local community history but to the history of our unique site. The staff at the McFaddin-Ward house played a pivotal role in the care and keeping of the McFaddin-Ward family, their home, and their objects. Some of the previous staff members graciously shared their stories with past curators and site historians who worked to transition the house into a museum. The staff's unique perspectives provide a more complete picture of what life was like here at 1906 McFaddin Ave. We thought that sharing their stories on our social media sites during Black History Month would be a nice way to honor their legacies. However, their stories, as well as other stories of Black contributions in Southeast Texas, deserve to be told during other times of the year as well.

RH: Therefore, we're committed to continuing the conversation beyond Black History Month. One way we hope to do that is through this podcast. We created a series exploring the Black experience in Southeast Texas, dating back to when Texas was still part of Mexico.

We're excited to continue researching and learning more about diverse experiences here in Beaumont, all part of the story of how we got to now. If there are topics that you would like us to research or if you have additions to the story, please reach out to us at mcfaddinwardhouse@gmail.com .

Musical flourish

RH: We're going back in time to the 1830s to better provide context to life in Beaumont prior to when our beautiful home was constructed in 1905 and 1906.

There was a small population of free people of color in Beaumont and East Texas prior to emancipation in 1865. The Ashworths, originally from South Carolina then Louisiana, were one such family. Before we get started with our story, we need to send a shout-out to Legal Historian and Professor Jason Gillmer for researching and writing about the Ashworth family in his article titled, "Shades of Gray: The Life and Times of a Free Family of Color on the Texas Frontier." This article was published in the *Law and Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice* Volume 29, Issue 1. This article provided much needed context to help Kara and I understand the complexities of race, community development, and how one family navigated complex social and economic systems during state building.

KT: Now to the Ashworths - the family primarily worked in agriculture, producing fruits and vegetables, rice, and livestock. They migrated during complicated political times between Texas and Mexico. The Mexican government closed immigration into the Texas territories in 1830 due to conflicts with Anglo settlers - one such issue was that of slavery. However, immigration was allowed to resume in 1834.

Therefore, when William Ashworth and his wife Delaide first crossed the Sabine River into Texas in 1831, they did so illegally. Their siblings quickly followed. By 1846, there

were 13 Ashworth families in Jefferson County according to Jefferson County tax rolls. The Ashworths were not the only free people of color in Texas during this time. There were perhaps about 500 or so free people of color in the whole state, so they definitely weren't a majority of the population.

RH: Something interesting happened in Texas between the 1830s and 1860s. For example, the 1850 census shows there were 33 free Black males and 29 free Black females in Beaumont. In 1860, there was only one Black male living in Beaumont and no females. In this same year, the census reported 309 enslaved individuals living in Beaumont, comprising about 15% of the population during this time. So, what triggered that change, and what does this have to do with the Ashworths, or even the McFaddins for that matter?

We're so lucky to have a descendant of the Ashworths with us today, Allen Jackson. Allen is a neighbor of the McFaddin-Ward House here in the Oaks Historic District. He graciously opened his home to the community for the open house Christmas event back in December. When I told him I was a historian here, he said "Boy, do I have a story for you," and he wasn't wrong. Ever since that day, I've thought about the Ashworth family and wanted to know more.

Thank you, Allen, for joining us.

AJ: No problem.

RH: Can you tell us how you're related to the Ashworths?

AJ: We can start with me, and then my dad is Allen Jackson Sr. and then his mother was Wilma Julian, her mother was Shirley McNeel, her mother was Rachael Ashworth Morris, her father was Alexis Ashworth, and his father was Moses Ashworth.

So that's how it goes down the family – I think it's like five times great-grandfather or something is Moses Ashworth.

RH: When did you first learn of your familial connection to the early Texas Ashworths?

AJ: My step-mom - I have to give her credit for doing all this research - she's real big on ancestry.com and so she did all of the research. I asked her yesterday – she started about seven years ago, trying to put it all together, but I don't think she told the whole family right away because she was trying to get all of the information together instead of bits and pieces, trying to put it all as one story. And I'm trying to think, maybe it was about three or four years ago that she shared with the rest of the family.

KT: Has your immediate family - parents, grandparents always resided in SETX?

AJ: My grandparents met in Galveston, and that's where they raised their family, so my grandmother was born here in Beaumont. The family has always considered pretty

much Beaumont from that point as their central home even though they moved where work was. Like if there was work in Galveston, they would move to Galveston and then they would work and they would come back to Beaumont or they would go to Louisiana, work in Louisiana and then come back to Beaumont. So different members of my family were born in the area, but they followed where the work was, where they could make money. But Beaumont was always home even if they weren't born here.

RH: What do you think motivated the Ashworths to emigrate from Louisiana to Texas?

AJ: From what I was reading and from what my stepmother had told me, it was because they were a mixed-race family and back in the early 1800s, there really was no such thing as a mixed race. So, if you were part Indian, you were American Indian or if you were African American, then you were all African American. So back then the stigma was really bad. People of different backgrounds and races were treated unfairly with the laws and stuff, so they migrated to try to get to where they would not be discriminated against.

RH: And interestingly, they came to Texas.

AJ: Yes. They went to Louisiana first because there was a neutral zone where the United States and Mexico were in dispute and a parcel of land between the Sabine and the Calcasieu River and that whole area was settled by multi-racial families. That's why Southwest Louisiana has so many different cultures because all of them came so they could try to avoid being discriminated against. At the time, no one would send their armies in there, but then once it was decided it was on the U.S. side, and they were on the slavery side, then the family tried to go across the Sabine into Mexico because Mexico was anti-slavery. They were trying to flee persecution and discrimination.

KT: What sort of work did they do?

AJ: From what the research shows, they operated a ferry landing, and I know it was somewhere on the Neches River. I'm not exactly sure where, but I do know it was in Jefferson County. I remember seeing a piece of paper where they had to apply in Jefferson County to be able to operate the business. They were actually very successful. They actually made good money and were very, very successful being ferrymen.

RH: Can you tell us a little about the Ashworths' role in the community prior to the Texas Revolution?

AJ: They were well-respected along with other families that were mixed-race at the time – the Ashworths weren't the only ones who were here. If you worked hard and you made something of yourself, you contributed back to the community, you were respected.

KT: They walked this interesting color line prior to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1860. What do you think of this complicated racial identity, especially when they also held people in bondage?

AJ: Well, I mean, it was very difficult to read some of the stuff. The Ashworths actually did own slaves, which was shocking to me. Growing and learning different things in history, it's very strange to find out that your family actually owned slaves. They were just trying to fit in. They felt like if they could fit in, the less discrimination would be against them, so I think that they did most of what they did to try to blend in and not be discriminated against. Back then, it was just a different world. I mean it wasn't like today where there are laws and stuff to protect you and keep you from being discriminated against. Back then, it's like if you were different, it was okay to discriminate against you. It was okay to treat someone badly because they were different. And they just didn't want to be treated badly, so I think they tried to do as much as they could to try to blend in and be part of the community.

KT: The Ashworths fully supported Texas Independence as did multiple families considered to be of color. Some served in battle, suffering injuries, while others served as interpreters with various Native American groups. Multiple families donated money and supplies. William Ashworth joined the military in 1835, serving for three months. After an honorable discharge he sent a substitute in his place. His brother, Aaron, was also noted to have aided the war effort.

Despite the Ashworth's efforts they were still targeted for their racial designation. Section 9 of the Texas Constitution made clear that Blacks were welcome in Texas, as slaves. Also, in 1836, legislators decided to prohibit future immigration of free people of color and also forced those already living in Texas to leave. This posed quite a conundrum for Ashworth and the many other families already settled and depending on their land for their family's livelihoods. Basically, the argument existed that free people of color disrupted the natural order of society and would provoke the enslaved to rebel.

RH: In February of 1840, the Texas Legislature repealed a previously passed act from 1837 that allowed free Blacks to stay in Texas post-independence from Mexico. Growing sentiments and a desire to implement a firm color line related to slavery was the prevailing ideology of 1840. There was concern that free blacks disrupted the social order and could provoke the enslaved to organize uprisings. The solution to the problem was to expel all free people of color living in the new nation and also prevent future immigration by additional free blacks.

In response to the passing of this law, free blacks organized petitions, signed by their white neighbors, friends, and oftentimes family members as a result of marriage. The Ashworth family sent three such petitions to Congress, all signed by 60 plus neighbors. One notable supporter of the Ashworths was William McFaddin, who added his signature to the petition. William was the father of W.P.H. McFaddin who bought the house here at 1906 McFaddin Ave. Those who submitted petitions to remain in Texas argued their residency based on past military service or financial support of the Texas

Revolution. Their neighbors recognized their contribution to community building and wanted them to stay.

The Ashworth Act was eventually passed by Congress on December 12, 1840, then signed by President Lamar.

Professor Gillmer notes how this institutionalized forced expulsion demonstrates a disconnect between the law and reality. Free people of color and whites were co-existing just fine. However, that didn't stop the Texas government from issuing new constraints, solely based on race, beginning in 1837. For example, interracial marriage was illegal, free people of color were categorized with the enslaved regarding crime and capital punishment. An example of such a categorization is that both the enslaved and free POC were forbidden from insulting white people. The consequence for breaking any of the laws on the books was forced bondage.

The Ashworths experienced a great deal of trouble when applying for land grants from the newly formed office of the Texas land commissioner. They were denied their holdings, solely based on their race, then forced to petition for what was promised to their white neighbors. Again, their neighbors rallied on their behalf, and in 1843 a bill was passed by Congress directing the land commissioner to issue land patents to the Ashworth men and members of the Bird and Nelson families. By the beginning of the civil war the Ashworths owned thousands of acres.

KT: The Ashworths were never granted full citizenship in Texas. For example, they were never allowed to serve on a jury. However, their wealth and community connections placed them existing somewhere in the middle of this complex racialized society. They were well-respected and thought to have a good ethic, were loyal to their neighbors, and industrious. But none of that mattered as calls for abolition grew. A firm color line was distinguished in Texas, as elsewhere in the South, the middle ground where the Ashworth's delicately tread, no longer existed.

The Ashworths dealt with increased harassment, accusations of criminal wrongdoing such as cattle stealing, larceny, and slander. Members of the family were charged with fornication related to their inter-racial marriages. Their children were denied education, forcing the hiring of private tutors, an expensive option only available to the wealthy.

RH: It all came to a head during the summer of 1856, four years before the official first shot was fired in the Civil War. An Ashworth killed a white man after he was sentenced to receive 30 lashes for the crime of uttering abusive language towards a white man. This arrest and punishment solidified the social hierarchy, in that moment the Ashworths knew exactly where they stood. Whether the killing was justified or not, is not the conundrum. What happened next speaks volumes to how quickly feelings changed leading into the Civil War.

After the killing, a vigilante group formed, vowing to expel all free people of color from Jefferson County. The summer of 1856 witnessed a mini civil war as people took sides,

either supporting the Ashworths or the vigilante's demands. The town of Orange and now Orange County, used to be Jefferson County, basically devolved into chaos on June 15, 1856. The sheriff who supported the Ashworths was murdered as were many defendants of the family. Many of the Ashworth's moved back to Louisiana that summer to avoid dangerous confrontations. Members of the family began selling off land holdings out of fear. Some of the Ashworths eventually returned, but struggled to maintain their wealth

By 1860, there were only 29 free people of color left in all of Jefferson County.

KT: Allen, why do you think hostilities increased towards the Ashworths and other free people of color between the 1850s and 1860s?

AJ: It seemed like that kind of hostility and division came with development of the area. It's like the further west people moved and the more economic development came, the more divided the race relations became - at least it seems in my opinion. It's like everyone was okay because they were out there by themselves and before it didn't matter, but now, it's like there's enough people there that it does matter now. I think that's a big part of what happened. They were very discriminatory and making the racial lines more divided.

KT: How does one pick up and move on after this?

AJ: That's what all families did back then. It's like if things got too heated in one particular town or city, you went back to where you knew it was safer. So, if the group moved over to Louisiana, then it would calm down in Texas. And they would just keep going back and forth. It's like "Okay, we made everybody mad over here, so now we're going to go back over there. And then we'll stay here for a little while until they get mad at us, and then we'll go back." It was going back and forth. I don't know if they ever really got past it - it was just they were trying to avoid it. They just wanted to live their life without being discriminated against, and it was just at that time with all of the different economic and social and race lines, it was extremely difficult. So, they would have to move just for safety reasons.

KT: Do you know if anyone from the family during this tumultuous time left diaries or journals?

AJ: Not that I'm aware of. I know that my stepmom is really fluid with this kind of stuff, and whenever somebody joins ancestry.com or anything like that, and it ties it in, she's there. That's how we found some pictures and stuff of different relatives that we didn't have on my side of the family - even though it was a direct descendant of mine but somebody else on the other side had the picture - and they were able to share that through that. Hopefully maybe something will show up someday, but as far as we know, there is no actual diary or anything

RH: What is the takeaway you want people to get from your family's story?

AJ: Well, I mean one is that I had no clue that this was in my family's history, so finding this out was just exciting for me. It's very interesting and exciting to know I am who I am because of these people and these people were pioneers back before the Civil War to get minority rights done. Of course, it was, given the times, it fell short, but they were pioneers. They started out, and they were like "We're here, and we want to be part of the community, and please accept us," and I think that's just very cool, for your family to know that about your family.

KT: What kind of resources did you or your family utilize to conduct your research?

AJ: My stepmom used ancestry.com for the most part, and then she used I think the Texas Land Commission for the deeds and stuff. I think that's mainly the two main things. I think there was some kind of state legislature where they had the Ashworth Act where they had all of those lined out on a website – I can't remember the name of it – but it's lined out. And she found the actual Ashworth Act on that one. But it's mainly through ancestry.com.

RH: In your findings, what was the most surprising thing you discovered?

AJ: Well, just knowing I was related to them in the first place to me. I think that's absolutely amazing and what they did and what they accomplished for that time period. To be an African American family prospering before the Civil War in a predominantly white community is amazing. To me, that was just very shocking, and I'm just proud to know that's where I came from.

KT: If you could talk to Moses or William Ashworth, what would you ask them about?

AJ: Honestly, how much further back the family goes if they know. Because I don't know if we can go much further back than them. I would like to know their personal experience. When you're researching things, they give you the facts and the data. I would want to know "How did you feel? How did it affect you personally?" I would want more of the human relation type thing. If I could ask, that is what I would want to know – "How did it affect you mentally and spiritually?"

RH: Well, Allen, we appreciate your time today and sharing your family's story and the connection to the McFaddins.

AJ: Thank you very much. I really appreciate being here.

KT: Now, let's talk about Texas during Reconstruction.

RH: Sounds good.

KT: The reading of the Emancipation Proclamation on June 19, 1865 led to more questions than answers and confusion abounded for both Whites and Blacks about what an integrated life could look like in Texas. Reactions varied among the now formerly enslaved. There were reports of celebration, while others were more tentative in approaching this newfound freedom. There were concerns about existing in a free society with no education or financial prospects. However, emancipation meant hope for future generations to fully live their lives experiencing liberty and able to pursue their desired happiness.

RH: Immediately upon emancipation, the formerly enslaved began organizing education efforts, with the aid of the Freedmen's Bureau - this was a federal agency charged with protecting Blacks in court proceedings, employment endeavors, and basically just staying alive as they often became the targets for racial violence by those unhappy with the results of the Civil War. Education was of primary importance in the Black community, especially after being denied access to education during their time in bondage. They built makeshift schools and paid teachers with food from their harvests or paid a small tuition. They organized their own churches, leaving Anglo churches. School and church became a center of social life. These important civic spaces also became the target of extreme violence by white supremacists, a trend that carried over into the 20th and 21st centuries. Freedmen also began the search for relatives in an effort to reconstruct their families after forced separation.

KT: Black Northern Unionists migrated to Texas to set up relief agencies while German inhabitants often provided safe places for hunted freedmen as well as employment services for those looking for work. Migrating African Americans, hoping to find opportunity in cities faced discrimination by Anglo business owners and by government officials attempting to regulate their activities. Despite multiple barriers to economic prosperity, many Blacks opened shops and provided needed services in urban areas.

RH: Life in the country wasn't any easier for the freedmen and women. They faced organized violence by White landowners, one of whom thought the formerly enslaved would be better off dead so he went about poisoning water wells, killing "scores" before they could escape the plantation, according to the oral histories of two women whose stories were captured as part of the 1930s "slave narrative" project, in the collection of the Library of Congress.

Describing life as difficult for these people is an understatement. Yet, despite it all, they persevered.

KT: We're often asked about slavery here at the McFaddin-Ward House, which can be a bit of a sticky topic, and is not always so straight and narrow. Because W.P.H and Ida - they never held people in bondage at our historic house - but this house was acquired by the McFaddins in 1906, 41 years post emancipation, so we've got to think that slavery did play a part in their success.

RH: Yeah, that's a really good point, and we're often asked that here at the site like you just mentioned. So, when Emancipation happened here in 1865, W.P.H. was nine years old, nine years old at the conclusion of the Civil War. Therefore, he comes of age in this really interesting time of Reconstruction. And Ida is living in West Virginia. Her dad owns coal mines out that way, so she comes from a very different type of existence when it comes to enslavement. We do know the McFaddins, William and Rachel, did hold people in bondage – we found that from the U.S. Census Slave Schedule which was taken in 1860. I believe there were eight people that were noted on that census who lived with William and Rachel. So, this is a very complicated story. The economic prosperity of the McFaddins would have been connected to the institution of slavery, and I think we as historians here should acknowledge that complicated nature of what we're dealing with.

W.P.H. went on to get his education, and he began acquiring land after 1881. He eventually acquires about 120,000 acres in Jefferson County and 48,000 acres in Knox and King counties. It's important to note that he was not using enslaved labor. He was perhaps using the labor of the formerly enslaved who were choosing to work with him or even their children if they went into the cattle ranching business too. It's my understanding that he employed a diverse workforce to work his multiple agricultural enterprises. The African American cowboys were huge contributors to the ranch's success and often don't get their due in public memory of westward expansion.

KT: We do know that the McFaddins were fair employers. W.P.H. was known to work the ranches alongside the employees – quite literally, boots on the ground. A unique camaraderie transpired, an almost egalitarian type of existence while on the ranch, that transcended the color line. However, at the end of the day, the employer was still the employer and the employee still the employee.

RH: So, thanks for joining us on this very complicated journey of history.

KT: We hope you'll tune in for the rest of our series featuring the stories of the African American community in Southeast Texas.

Music

Follow along on our social media platforms for behind-the-scenes info and to learn more about the McFaddin-Ward House.

Music

This episode was presented by Kara Timberlake and Rayanna Hoeft. Todd Hoeft produced and edited the episode. Music produced and performed by Todd Hoeft and Tom Deemer.