

Eliza Bradshaw

An Exoduster Grandmother

edited by Sam Dicks

And Moses said unto the people, Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

—Exodus 13.3

Mattie Leatha Bradshaw's grandparents, Lewis and Eliza Bradshaw, had emigrated with their children from near Harrodsburg in Mercer County, Kentucky, to Hodgeman County, Kansas, in April 1879, joining other "exodusters" from Mercer and Fayette Counties who had arrived in March 1878.¹ As Moses had led the exodus of the ancient Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt to the "promised land," modern clergymen and other leaders led these former slaves and their families in an exodus out of the defeated but hostile American South and into what they believed was the promised land of Kansas.

The older Bradshaw children found work in Kinsley, Dodge City, or on nearby ranches. George and John W. Bradshaw, two of Mattie's uncles, soon developed skills as stone masons. Other siblings became

Sam Dicks received his doctorate from the University of Oklahoma and has been a member of the Emporia State University history faculty since 1965. He currently is working on a history of the university.

The editor is indebted to numerous relatives and acquaintances of Mattie Bradshaw including Wilburn Bradshaw, Jetmore; David Bradshaw, Los Angeles; Ray O. Pleasant, Chaska, Minn.; Gloria Blue, Independence, Mo.; Eugene Bunch, Topeka; and the Reverend A. J. Pearson, Shiloh Baptist Church, Topeka. He also is indebted to Marilyn Greeve of the Topeka Public Schools and the staffs of the Topeka Public Library, the Topeka Genealogical Society, the Washburn University Library, the Jetmore Public Library, the Hodgeman County Recorder of Deeds Office, the Kansas State Historical Society, and the Emporia State University Archives.

1. F. G. Adams, "The Hodgeman Colored Colony," *Hodgeman Agitator* (Hodgeman Center), May 17, 1879. This article originally appeared in the *Boston Journal* and with various titles in the *Topeka Daily Commonwealth*, May 7, 1879; *Fordham Republican*, June 11, 18; and in other Kansas newspapers. Adams provides March 24, 1878, as the date a party of 107 from Harrodsburg and Lexington, Kentucky, arrived in Kinsley, Kansas. An earlier small advance party had been selected in 1877 to choose a location, and "additions have since been made in the number of about 60." The Bradshaw family most likely was among these sixty because Mattie's article, when referring to the death of her grandfather, suggests early 1879 as the time of their arrival. H. C. Norman, "History of Hodgeman County Kansas" (manuscript, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, 1941), 3, gives April 1879 as the date that George Washington Bradshaw (Mattie's uncle) and several others arrived. Ages and places of birth of the children in the 1880, 1885, and later censuses also imply 1879 as the year of arrival. See U.S. Census, 1880, Hodgeman County, Center Township; Kansas State Census, 1885, Hodgeman County, Center Township.

Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains 26 (Summer 2003): 108–13.



Mattie Bradshaw, ca. 1907.

blacksmiths, mechanics, or practiced other trades to survive and support their families. These labors provided income during periods of low farm prices and of drought in a harsh climate.

Mattie was almost ten years old when her parents, Charles T. and Mary Elizabeth Bradshaw, moved from Hodgeman County, in southwestern Kansas, to Topeka in about 1897 so their children might have an education beyond elementary school. Her father at first worked as a fruit peddler and later as a janitor at the state capitol. Mat-

attained her seventh year, she was sold to another planter. The little girl experienced her first trials and hardships at her new home. Surely the institution of slavery was the most cruel and heartless invention of man, as it separated the child from her mother, whom she never saw again. When I think of the agony which the mother must have felt, tears unbidden stream down my cheeks. Grandma never knew her father, for she never saw him. He would not own her because she was born black side out, while he was born black side in.³ There is a chance for cleanliness

Early one cold December morning, on a large plantation in Mercer county, Kentucky, a girl baby first saw the light of day. She was born of slave parents, in the utmost poverty.

tie graduated from Topeka High School in 1905 and received a Life Teaching Certificate from the Kansas State Normal School (now Emporia State University) in 1908.

While student teaching at the campus Model School in the fall of 1907, she wrote the following story, which appeared on October 18 in the student newspaper, the *State Normal Bulletin*.²

MY GRANDMOTHER'S STORY

by Mattie Bradshaw

Early one cold December morning [in 1827], on a large plantation in Mercer county, Kentucky, a girl baby first saw the light of day. She was born of slave parents, in the utmost poverty and wretchedness. The little cabin hut, which was her first home, contained one room in which there were no openings or windows, save the one door. There a large family of children were reared, of which grandma was the sixth.

The first few years of her life passed pleasantly and quickly away. Finally, one bright morning when she had

when blackness is external, but when it has penetrated beneath the surface, far beyond the range of human vision, there is hardly a chance for purification.

But to proceed with my story, Grandma remained with her new owners for seven or eight years. At this plantation she was treated as a human being, for her mistress was good and even kind to her. She pitied the sad-faced looking little girl, therefore she would not let her go into the fields to work, but taught her to do the sewing. Grandma was a good pupil and learned to sew well. This she never regretted, for by means of this trade she earned enough to support her family in later days.

However, this kind of life did not last long. Suddenly a reverse of fortune came to Mr. Lewis, her owner.⁴ A man whom he owed pressed him for the payment of a debt.

3. Although Mattie wrote that her grandmother was "born of slave parents," she suggests here that the white slaveholder who took her from her mother and sold her was her biological father, a practice not uncommon during slavery. Eliza is identified as a mulatto rather than a black in the 1880 federal census and the 1895 Kansas census. See U.S. Census, 1880, Hodgeman County, Center Township; Kansas State Census, 1895, Hodgeman County, Center Township.

4. J. A. Lewis is listed on the U.S. Census, 1830, Kentucky, Mercer County, with the following slaves: males, two under 10 years of age, one 10-24, one 24-35, one 36-54; females, four under 10, two 10-24, and two 24-36.

2. Black student teachers commonly did their student teaching on the campus, rather than in community public schools, in order to avoid parent objections.

Grandma's heart was nearly broken when she heard that she must leave her kind mistress, but her woe amounted to nothing when a planter said that he would give a cold thousand for her. She was sold. Her new master was one of the most unprincipled, degraded and demon-like beings that ever bore the name of man. Her mistress was cruel and hateful. Grandma soon learned what slavery meant.

As she was now about seventeen years old, as was the custom then, her owners began to think of finding her a husband. Therefore, after she had been on this plantation

kettle of boiling water from the stove and began throwing water. The slave driver was glad to leave her alone.

On the same day she was given a great many tasks to perform. When she was too weary to move another step, she sat down to rest. While she was resting, her mistress came in the kitchen and demanded to know if the work was done. On being told that it was not finished, she seized a broomstick and beat grandma on the top of the head until streams of blood oozed down her face, then she sprinkled salt on the wounds. Not satisfied with that, she

Her mistress came in the kitchen and demanded to know if the work was done. On being told that it was not finished, she seized a broomstick and beat grandma on top of the head.

about three months she was married to another slave on the same plantation. The ceremony consisted only of the reading of a passage of scripture by a local preacher and then the pair were pronounced husband and wife. This was the only ceremony that was performed when slaves married.

To this union were born seven sons and two daughters. All were born in slavery.⁵ When the oldest child was five years old, he had to take care of two younger children. One day he took the youngest child and went up to the "big house" to see his mother. The slave driver saw him and began to meddle, and when the child said something that made him angry, he knocked the little fellow down. Grandma, on hearing the confusion, stepped to the door and began to interfere in behalf of her child. As the slave driver started towards her with whip in hand she seized a

told her husband when he came home. Grandma heard Mr. Christian, for that was her owner's name, say that he would whip her when supper was over.⁶ She made up her mind that she had been treated cruelly enough that day, and she said within herself that she had taken her last whipping. She made up a hot fire and put on a larger kettle of water, so when Mr. Christian came in the kitchen and took down the rawhide, she smiled, for she knew that he little expected what was coming. When he started towards her she dipped her little bucket in the boiling kettle and began throwing water in every direction. She scalded Mr. Christian's hands and feet, also Mrs. Christian's face. After that incident grandma was called "Crazy Eliza," but she only smiled to herself whenever she was called by that name, for she was willing to be thought crazy if it would save her from being punished. She was never whipped again.

5. The sons and their ages in the 1870 U.S. Census for Mercer County, Kentucky (Precinct 6), were John W. 20, Granville 17, Lewis D. 14, Charles T. (Mattie's father) 12, Elex 8, George W. 7, and Benjamin F. 3. Benjamin was born after the abolishment of slavery. For enumeration of most family members after their arrival in Kansas, see U.S. Census, 1880, Hodgeman County, Center Township; Kansas State Census, 1885, Hodgeman County, Center Township. Lewis, age 24, is a cook, and George, age 17, is washing dishes at a Dodge City hotel according to the 1880 census. See *ibid.*, Ford County, Dodge Township. Granville, age 27, is a "hustler" (peddler) in Kinsley in 1880. See *ibid.*, Edwards County, Kinsley.

6. The surname Christian does not appear in the 1840, 1850, or 1860 federal censuses of Mercer County, but it appears frequently in the censuses for adjacent Fayette County. See U.S. Census, 1840, Kentucky, Mercer County and Fayette County; *ibid.*, 1850; *ibid.*, 1860. One of the larger slaveholders in Fayette County, according to the 1850 federal census slave schedule, was Thomas Christian. He, or other family members, may have held land and slaves in both counties. According to family tradition, the surname Bradshaw was chosen upon emancipation, rather than Christian, because, unlike the Christian family, slaveholding members of the Bradshaw family treated their slaves well. David Bradshaw, interview by author, March 20, 2003.

When she had endured cruelties and indignities for thirty years, one morning she awoke to find that she was free. President Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation.⁷ No more was she to be beaten and knocked about by dealers in human traffic. She could now say that the songs which she sang meant freedom of body in this world as well as freedom of spirit in the world of light. She was free, but what did she receive for her labors? She had been in slavery forty years. Her best days were spent. She had no money; she had nowhere to lay her head. For forty

years. They forgot that these same black men tilled the soil with their horny hands and watered it with their tears of humiliation. By some means the ex-slaves heard of a land where people of color were better treated. They heard that they could get a free education and would be protected by the laws, so when at last these would be marauders became so cruel and oppressive, my people began to emigrate to the so-called "land of the blest."⁸

Thus, while so many members of my race were emigrating, grandma struck the soil of "free and bleeding

When she had endured cruelties and indignities for thirty years, one morning she awoke to find that she was free. President Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

years her labor enriched the treasury of another race. She must now fight the battle for existence.

The first few years of freedom looked dark to the people of color. Grandma's first ambition was to give her children an education. She thought that if they could read and figure they could "make it" in the world. Accordingly, she sacrificed as only a mother would to give her children an education; therefore, the older children went to school about three months in a year for three years. Then their hopes were shattered almost beyond redemption. White Horse gangs and Ku Klux Klans paraded the state of Kentucky, burned down their school houses, drove the negroes from home, and burned some at the stake. The state of Kentucky offered the men of color no protection. They (the white race) soon forgot the faithful service of the negroes who had been their servants for two hundred and fifty

Kansas." She was accompanied by her husband, six sons and two daughters. They immediately moved to Hodgeman county, where grandfather took up a homestead. After they were there about six months grandfather finished his work on earth and went to answer the roll-call of death.⁹ Soon "hard times" began. They were in a new country, sparsely populated and with arid soil. Grandma had a hard time. Twice the first winter they thought they would have to give up, but they did not yield, for the privations were nothing compared to the persecutions and oppressions endured in the southlands. Many times they wore "gunny" sacks around their feet in place of shoes. Frequently they ate bread made of bran, but they called no man "master."

After a few years she and her sons were in fairly good circumstances. Four of her sons, including my father, had taken a quarter section of land each, and had begun to till

7. The Emancipation Proclamation, which went into effect on January 1, 1863, applied only to slaves in those states that had seceded from the Union and were not under Northern military control. Slavery remained legal in Kentucky until it was abolished by the ratification of the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution on December 6, 1865. However, it is easy to understand how Mattie Bradshaw and others thought of it as the document proclaiming the freedom of all slaves, for the Emancipation Proclamation did apply to most exodusters migrating from Southern states and was the symbol of freedom in the minds of virtually all former slaves and their families in the years following the Civil War.

8. For more details on the exoduster migration to Hodgeman County, see C. Robert Haywood, "The Hodgeman County Colony," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 12 (Winter 1989): 210-21. Early sources include Adams, "The Hodgeman Colored Colony"; Mrs. M. L. Sterrett, "Negro Colony Among Early Settlers of Hodgeman County," *Jetmore Republican*, April 25, 1930; Norman, *History of Hodgeman County Kansas*.

9. Lewis Bradshaw died of consumption (tuberculosis) at age fifty-three in August 1879. See U.S. Census, 1880, Hodgeman County, Mortality Schedule.

the soil with quite a degree of success.¹⁰ The last twenty years of grandma's life have been years of pleasure. She has not worked for her support, but is enjoying her life as she could not in her early years. She has numerous grandchildren who always hold open doors for her. Nothing is too good to give her nor is any task too hard to perform for her.

Grandma is now eighty-two years old. She did not have a great estate to give us, because when she was able to work her labor went unrewarded to replenish the pos-

Washington Schools. From 1916 to 1924 she taught in Buchanan School, and from 1924 to 1933 in Monroe School.¹¹

Mattie's younger sister, Maytie Bradshaw Williams (1899–1967), also became a teacher at Washington School in Topeka, and her brother, William Bradshaw (1897–1947), graduated from Washburn Law School in 1920 to become a prominent civil rights attorney in the capital city. Both Mattie and William held leadership positions on the state and national boards and committees of the National


The last twenty years of grandma's life have been years of pleasure. She has not worked for her support, but is enjoying her life as she could not in her early years.

sessions of another race, but she has given us her love. She has outlived her days of activity, but we love her still.

Eliza Bradshaw (1827–1913) never learned how to read or write, yet she lived to see her granddaughter, Mattie Leatha Bradshaw (1888–1956), graduate from college in June 1908 and become a teacher. After earning a Life Teaching Certificate from the Kansas State Normal School, Mattie returned to the home of her parents at 1547 Quincy Avenue in Topeka, and began her teaching career in the city's segregated schools. She taught in Madison School from 1908 to 1915, and during the 1915–1916 school year she held a split appointment between Monroe and

Baptist Convention and were active lay leaders in Topeka's Shiloh Baptist Church.¹²

Mattie resigned from the Topeka Public Schools, after twenty-five years of teaching, in August 1933. The superintendent of schools, A. J. Stout, wrote her, "I am sorry to lose you from the system as I liked your work and felt you were giving an excellent service. I wish you every happiness."¹³ In later years, in addition to her church activities, she was a case worker for the Shawnee County Welfare Department.¹⁴

Members of the Bradshaw family, beginning with the grandmother, supported education for their children, as well as their learning practical skills and trades. Their stories of success are true, not only of Mattie and her sister and brother but also of many cousins and other family members, from their years in Mercer County, Kentucky, to the present in Kansas and throughout the world. The Bradshaws endured slavery, drought, poverty, segregation, and prejudice. They never gave up. 

10. In addition to the grandparents and Mattie's father, John W., George W., and Granville Bradshaw held United States patents on 160 or more acres of land. Some of their lands were passed on to their descendants. Paul and Wilburn Bradshaw, grandsons of George Washington Bradshaw, are among the landowners who still farm in the area in 2003. See Land Records, Hodgeman County Register of Deeds, County Courthouse, Jetmore, Kans.; Wilburn Bradshaw, interview by author, February 21, 2003; Amy Bickel, "Keeping the History: Family's Ancestors were among Black Hodgeman Co. Settlers," *Hutchinson News*, February 16, 2003.

11. Payroll Records, Human Resources Department, Topeka Public Schools, Topeka; Record of Training and Experience, 1908–1933, *ibid.*

12. "William Bradshaw Dies Unexpectedly," *Topeka State Journal*, February 5, 1947.

13. A. J. Stout to Mattie Bradshaw, August 1, 1933, Human Resources, Department, Topeka Public Schools.

14. *Topeka City Directories*, 1938 and later.