

CHOCOLATE COMMUNITY

I. CONTEXT

Chocolate Community was an agricultural settlement located along Chocolate Bayou, in present-day Calhoun County, approximately five miles northwest of Port Lavaca. It was a thriving agricultural community from the 1840s into the early 20th century. The community was bordered on the east by the Indianola Railroad, on the south by SH 35, and on the north and west by what is today FM 1679.

The core of the community originated around where the Hatchbend Country Club is located today. This was a choice area due to the abundance of good grazing and farming land with a source of fresh water.

In 1846, the Texas Legislature, approved the formation of Calhoun County from portions of Jackson, Matagorda and Victoria Counties.¹ When the County was formed, there were already settlers well established in the vicinity of Chocolate Bayou, and the area became known as the “Chocolate Community”.²

II. OVERVIEW

Soon after Texas gained independence from Mexico, Captain Sylvanus Hatch (1788-1885), a native of Massachusetts, purchased a league of land (4428 acres) about six miles west of the town of Lavaca.³ The Chocolate Community got its real start when Mr. Hatch moved his family to the area in 1846 on a “bend” in Chocolate Bayou. The chocolate colored soil gave the bayou its name, and the fresh water provided for the family and livestock. Sylvanus built a home nearby on Aqua Dulce Creek, calling it “Agua Dulce”, and began ranching. This area around the Sylvanus Hatch home eventually became known as “Hatchbend”. Sylvanus established the Hatch Cemetery in this area in 1850, when his wife, Pamela, died of cholera. She and her husband had been attending to German immigrants camped nearby with the disease who had

arrived from Indianola. Sylvanus' brother, Joseph Hatch, moved his family from Massachusetts in 1846 and settled nearby on what was called the "Ridge". These two families became the core of the Chocolate Community.⁴

One of the earliest settlers in the area that became known as the Chocolate Community, was Dr. Moses Johnson (1808-1853). He came to Texas from New York in the late 1830s and obtained land near Chocolate Bayou. After being mayor of Austin in the early 1840s, and Treasurer of the Republic of Texas from 1844-45, he moved his family to his property near Chocolate Bayou in 1846, and became an early pioneer of this area. He died in a yellow fever epidemic on October 2, 1853, and is buried, along with his wife, Olivia, near the old home place.⁵

Charles Brett, Sr. (1805-1895), and wife, Mary, arrived in Calhoun County in 1847. Charles and Mary settled along Chocolate Bayou where Charles went to work on the ranch owned by Dr. Moses Johnson. In 1852, Dr. Johnson deeded four acres of land along the bayou to Mr. Brett, who later bought 45 more acres adjoining this property.⁶ In 1872, a single-story house that had been hit by a cannon ball when the Union Navy bombarded Lavaca during the Civil War in 1862, was disassembled and moved to the Brett property on Chocolate and rebuilt, just as it had stood in Lavaca.⁷ In 1898, Charles Brett, Jr. (1853-1943) decided to enlarge the house, so he built a two-story addition at the front and joined it to the original old house. This house still stands there today.⁸

Thomas Clark, and his brothers Daniel and John, his sisters Catherine and Jean, and his mother, Isabelle, immigrated to Calhoun County in 1850 from Scotland. After Thomas married Elizabeth Armstrong, he purchased a tract of land on Chocolate between Hatch and Brett and engaged in farming and ranching. His brother John built a home across the bayou from Thomas for his mother, Isabelle, and his sister Catherine, who married Daniel Markloff. John donated property and built stock pens in an area that became known as Clark's Station. It was along the Indianola Railroad and afforded area residents the ability to ship their crops and stock to market by rail.⁹ On June 14, 1899, John Clark deeded a tract of land behind his home for "family and

kindred” to Calhoun County Judge Martin Stephen Mahon. Today, this early burial ground is known as Clark Cemetery, and many Clark descendants are buried here.¹⁰

Louis Foester came to Texas around 1847. He first lived at Indianola and then Seadrift. While still living at Seadrift, he partnered with two Clark brothers to buy a sizable tract of land along Chocolate Bayou. He and the Clark brothers divided the land and he retained land east of the old railroad, and a section along the bayou. In 1881, Louis, and wife Catherine, left their Seadrift property and built a small house along the bayou on their new ranch. Here Louis ran cattle and had gardens to supply food for the family. Descendants of Louis Foester still own property in the area.¹¹

John Bierman and his wife, Susetta Maria (Mary) Roemer, were both raised in the Long Mott Community in Calhoun County. John purchased 640 acres of land in the Sweetwater Community in 1886 (not far from Chocolate Bayou) from Martha Hatch, daughter of Sylvanus.¹² John and Mary’s daughter, Belle Bierman Melcher kept a personal journal, and in it she recalls being raised in the Chocolate Community. Belle wrote, “I remember riding a horse side saddle, fording the Chocolate Creek to the Chocolate School, and racing horses with some of the neighbor Boyd boys. My first teacher was Mrs. Hattie Thayer. Our family had a fruit orchard with pears, peaches, plums and figs, and in those trees I could find nests of red birds, scissor tails, wild canaries and wild doves. There were turkey nests and prairie chickens.”

Belle remembered people having dances in their country homes, arriving in wagons covered in hay, and the little St. Paul’s on the Prairie Episcopal Church in the community. “I still miss the howl of the wolves at night. I loved the open prairies and wildlife and the cattle, horses, pigs and sheep that were so abundant on all those big ranches.”¹³ Her father, John Bierman died on May 24, 1903 from typhoid fever at the age of 47.¹⁴ Mary moved the family to Port Lavaca. Fourth generations continue to own the property today.

The main focal point of the Chocolate Community was the church, St. Paul’s-on-the-Prairie Episcopal Church. Sylvanus Hatch and his brother, Joseph, donated a piece of land about a mile from their homes for the construction of the church.¹⁵ Bishop Alexander Gregg said of the

church, "It is a bright jewel in the crown of the diocese." Joseph Hatch brought bibles and Episcopal prayer books to Texas. Phoebe McKee, niece of Sylvanus, brought a melodian organ from Massachusetts that was placed on a conveyance and carried to church for each service. Lay services were conducted by Charles Brett, Sr, a lay reader from the Church of England.¹⁶

Families who worshipped there were Hatch, Clark, Brett, Boyd, Markloff, Davison, Foester, Bouquet, Roemer and Bierman. Episcopal records of the Diocese of West Texas, June 1884 and June 1885 report, "There is much spiritual life in this Church. The attendance is very good, the people cheerfully leaving their work to attend Devine Services."¹⁷ Around 1872, a separate building, the Chocolate School, was built in the area.¹⁸

The original church was destroyed in the 1886 hurricane that devastated Indianola, but was rebuilt and continued to operate out of this location into the early 1900s.¹⁹ In 1919, a new Episcopal Church was built at Clark's Station because of the availability of the railroad for travels by the priest and bishop. This church, which continued to be the community center, was built by the Brett family on a plot of land they donated for this purpose.²⁰

By 1936, the Chocolate Community had declined and the church and school closed. The school was consolidated with the Port Lavaca School in 1918, and the members of St. Paul's drove to Port Lavaca for services.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

No longer does a gentle Chocolate Bayou flow through the black land. Instead, a deep steep-sided Chocolate Bayou rapidly flows around Hatchbend. The locomotive, "Old Salty", no longer stops at Clark's Station to let ministers off to pray at St. Paul's-on-the-Prairie. Instead, individual and cemetery markers designate the area. Individual Historical Markers for Moses Johnson and Sylvanus Hatch recognize their contributions to Texas. Both Hatch Cemetery and Clark Cemetery have received the Historic Texas Cemetery marker. These cemeteries serve as a record of family pioneers and are still in use today. They are the last physical remaining vestiges of the Chocolate Community.

The families who made up the community, traveling by horse and buggy through black sticky mud to St. Paul's-on-the-Prairie to "cheerfully leave their work to attend Devine Services" deserve recognition. A multicultural community, English, German and Scots wove their cultures to create a warm, caring community, with dances, picnics, and visits by horseback to neighbors in times of death and birth. Education and religion were the focal points for this sharing community. A Historical Marker for the Chocolate Community will share these events with county residents and visitors for generations to come.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

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- ¹ Calhoun County Historical Commission, Shifting Sands of Calhoun County 1981, p. 6.
 - ² Calhoun County Historical Commission, Shifting Sands of Calhoun County 1981, p. 170.
 - ³ Port Lavaca Wave, Calhoun County Centennial and Golden Jubilee History, "Episcopalians Formed Nucleus of Church in 46", Section V, p. 6.
 - ⁴ Calhoun County Historical Commission, Shifting Sands of Calhoun County 1981, p. 170.
 - ⁵ <https://www.findagrave.com>, Calhoun County, Moses Johnson.
 - ⁶ Calhoun County Historical Commission, George Fred Rhodes, Dana Burke, Shifting Sands of Calhoun County, 1981, p. 122.
 - ⁷ Calhoun County Times, Katie Guidry, "Chocolate Founded by Captain Hatch", April 4, 1967.
 - ⁸ City of Port Lavaca, Port Lavaca, Texas 1840-1990, "Joe Brett House", p. 214.
 - ⁹ City of Port Lavaca, Port Lavaca, Texas 1840-1990, Eula Grace Wedig, "Thomas Clark Family", p. 245.
 - ¹⁰ Calhoun County Texas Warranty Deed, Vol. 42, pp. 3-4.
 - ¹¹ John Foester, "Chocolate Community Marker", June 11, 2019, p. 1.
 - ¹² Calhoun County Deed Records, Vol. 25, p. 439.
 - ¹³ Belle Bierman Melcher, Personal Journal, "Tribute to the Past," 1968, typed by Judy and Willie Belle Melcher, in the property of Mary Melcher Meitzen, 305 Glenbrook, Port Lavaca, Texas.
 - ¹⁴ State of Texas, Calhoun County, Certificate of Vital Records.
 - ¹⁵ Calhoun County Historical Commission, Shifting Sands of Calhoun County 1981, p. 170.
 - ¹⁶ Eula Grace Wedig, "St. Paul's on the Prairie", Grace Parish Episcopal Church History Files, 212 E. Austin, Port Lavaca, Texas.
 - ¹⁷ Eula Grace Wedig, "St. Paul's-on-the-Prairie"
 - ¹⁸ Calhoun County Affidavit from Mrs. May Deats to Public, 1935, Vol.26, p. 98.
 - ¹⁹ Calhoun County Affidavit from Mattie Davison Mercer to Public, 1935, Vol. 26, pp. 98-99.
 - ²⁰ Calhoun County Warranty Deed from Charles Brett, Jr. to the Episcopal Church dated November 3, 1919, Vol. 10, p. 527.

