

Written Testimony and Background Information by Dr. Robert Brunswig in Support of the
Dearfield Study Act (H.R. 6438) to the House Sub-Committee on National Parks, Forests, and
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Dearfield: An Early 20th Century African-American Farm Colony
and Townsite in Weld County, Colorado

Dearfield was an unincorporated town in northeastern Colorado's southeast Weld County, 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 townsite 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 African American farmers and ranchers who lived alongside earlier established families whose members were native-born to Mexico, Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, France, Bohemia, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and Russia. Although the established colony was an African American enterprise, it truly existed in an ethnically diverse sea of other cultures and national origins. Jackson's vision for creating the townsite 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 who advocated a middle-ground approach for achieving African-American economic self-sufficiency and social advancement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During its early years, one of Washington's sons, Booker T. Washington, Jr. and his family, and Washington's widow were visitors to the colony, recognizing and supporting its importance and inspiration to the nation's African American population.

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 similar efforts from the Antebellum era through World War I and including such well-known towns as New Philadelphia (Illinois), Nicodemus (Kansas), and Booker (Texas). In 1915, Jackson informed a writer for *Western Farm Life* magazine that the Dearfield Colony and townsite had 27 families, 44 wood-framed houses, a concrete block factory, a lodge hall, a restaurant, grocery store, and boarding house with 595 acres in cropland. Only a few years after the townsite's founding (1914), a second colony town of Chapelton, four and a half miles to the southeast, had emerged and, between 1914 and 1922, grew to rival and even exceed the importance of Dearfield, gaining the colony's only official U.S. Post Office (est. 1917), official county school (est. 1919), and hosting three churches between 1914 and 1920. 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). In 1918, reports in the African American Denver Star newspaper indicate that a Dearfield town mission church, established by the Denver People's Presbyterian Church in 1914, was physically uprooted and moved to Chapelton, leaving only a small Pentecostal Church in the Dearfield townsite.

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 acquired under the 1862 Homestead and Desert Land Acts. Between 1919 and 1923, the colony, including its two small towns, held between 100 and 200 full or part-time residents and the town of Dearfield was in promotional literature to have consisted of 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, an unofficial 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 those records also showed its African American population was smaller than stated in Jackson's promotional flyers, with 28 full-time households having 96 family members. The dynamic community atmosphere of early Dearfield is demonstrated by its residents' participation in collective road building and maintenance, fielding a local African-American baseball team which played other small town (non-African American) teams in the area, the holding of annual community fairs and rodeos, and establishment of an integrated school under the newly created Chapelton School District (124) in 1919. Due to higher-than-normal rainfall before and during World War I, Dearfield residents who homesteaded or purchased farmland in the colony and towns prospered, raising wheat, corn, sugar beets, and vegetables. The town and colony's economic prosperity declined and then virtually ended with increasingly severe drought in the mid-late 1920s and full onset of severe "dust bowl" drought conditions of the 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. Only a handful of African American farms survived the Dust Bowl and Depression, with last farmstead ending with the passing of its elderly occupants in the 1970s. The last Dearfield town residents, O.T. Jackson, its founder, and Squire Brockman, passed away in 1948 and 1951, respectively.

The Dearfield Dream Project

The Dearfield Dream Project is a collaborative research and historic site preservation program which builds on earlier work by the Dearfield townsite's owner, the Denver's Black American West Museum, and researchers from the City of Greeley Museums, University of Northern Colorado, University of Colorado (Boulder), Colorado State University, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The project integrates archaeological, historical, and environmental studies with programs designed to protect and preserve surviving historic buildings of the above described early 20th Century African-American town and colony of Dearfield.

Dream Project research since 2010 has included archaeological and remote sensing (cesium magnetometry and ground-penetrating radar) surveys, archaeological excavations and analysis of artifacts and building remains at the founding colony townsite 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 townsite in 2011, 2012 and 2013 resulted in discovery of building remnants at a second colony town of Chapelton and field identifications of some of its original farm homesteads, including that of the colony physician, Dr. Wade Jones. Archaeological field programs at the Dearfield townsite have taken place in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2020, 2021, and 2022 and provided extensive new knowledge on its residents' lifestyles, economic systems, and social interactions. Archaeological research at Dearfield is highly interdisciplinary, including not only standard excavations but also utilizing geophysics (ground penetrating radar and cesium magnetometry), 3-D laser scanning of Dearfield buildings, and high-resolution drone (UAV) photo-mapping technologies. Historic and archaeological data bases, publications, and public and professional conference presentations resulting from project research form the basis of constructing firm and highly accurate foundations for future colony and townsite studies and better understanding of its historic role in late 19th and early 20th century African-American social justice and economic self-sufficiency movements in Colorado, western and mid-western regions, and the nation. An early contribution of Dream Project research was a comprehensive Dearfield Agricultural Colony Historic American Landscapes (HAL) Survey report to the National Park Service in 2012. New work on an expanded up-dated HAL survey report will start production in 2023 in conjunction with an academic press volume on the Dearfield colony, its towns, and farms. The project's emerging research database is increasingly expanding our understanding of the colony's national and regional significance for African American social, economic, and political discrimination and environmental ["dust-bowl" climate change] issues leading to modern times. Small Dearfield conferences open to the public have been held at the University of Northern Colorado and Colorado State University, and professional research papers presented at national and regional academic and historic preservation conferences, since 2012.

The Dearfield Dream Project is an outgrowth of earlier efforts led 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 both an advisory group to Denver's Black American West Museum and a stand-alone action group with its own parallel non-profit 501c3 organization, the Western Historic & Unique Townsites (WHUT). The committee's members represent several public and private organizations, including the Black American West Museum, the University of Northern Colorado, the City of Greeley Museums, Colorado Preservation, Inc., the City of Greeley, and Weld County Government. Other affiliated partners and project supporters not formally part of, but affiliated with, the committee include the Great Plains Studies Institute (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), Colorado State University, the University of Colorado, U.S. Congressman Ken Buck, U.S. Congressman Joe Neguse, U.S. Senator Michael Bennet, and U.S. Senator John Hickenlooper.

At present, the University of Northern Colorado is the primary academic institution through which Dearfield Dream Project research and townsite preservation funding is solicited and administered. Since 2012, the University has secured four Colorado State Historical Fund grants for a total of \$117,111 and an on-going National Park Service African American Civil Rights Grant for \$497,776. Prior to the Dream Project, the Black American West Museum was successful in acquiring townsite property and stabilizing funding for standing buildings through grants from the Colorado State Historical Fund and a 2001 Colorado State Legislature appropriation. To date, external funding projects from 1993 to 2022 have totaled \$1,027,577.

Sustained anti-vandalism, stabilization, and historic restoration programs began in 2010 and were formalized with creation of the Dearfield Strategic Preservation Plan in 2018. Under that plan, its

progressively phased action programs have consistently moved forward toward conversion of the site's two standing buildings, the Jackson House and Filling Station, into historically restored museum, research, and education outreach facilities. Historic stabilization and restoration projects, currently represented by an in-progress National Park Service African American Civil Rights Grant program, follow the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Historic Preservation and are implemented with the townsite's potential National Park Service National Historic Site status in mind.

The legislative process to designate the Dearfield townsite, designated a National Register Historic Places District in 1995, as a National Historic Site within the National Park Service (NPS) began in fall 2021. A U.S. House of Representatives "Dearfield Study Act" bill toward that end was introduced by Colorado Congressmen Ken Buck and Joe Neguse in January 2022. The National Park Service, in response to a November 3, 2021, request by Congressmen Ken Buck and Joe Neguse for a Dearfield reconnaissance survey, an initial step in a potential National Historic Site designation, approved the start of the survey process no later than Fiscal Year 2023. The survey, which has a yet-to-be-determined period of execution subject to NPS staff and time resources, will occur in parallel with consideration and the voting approval of the Dearfield Study Act by the U.S. House of Representatives. The first step in passage of the act is associated with this House Natural Resources Committee's Sub-committee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands hearing on July 14th, 2022.