

Bryan Orphan Home

By Bill Page

An accident, an illness, an act of violence – whatever the reason, sometimes tragedy strikes and children are left without parents. Even when parents are still living, they may be unable or unfit to care for their families. Absent loving relatives or kindly neighbors, such youths may have no one to turn to, and some institution must insure their well being.

The early 1900s were a time of strict racial segregation in Texas, with separate churches, schools and other institutions serving the needs of whites and African Americans. So it is not surprising when blacks in Brazos County saw the need for an orphanage that they created one targeted to the needs of their people.

An African American orphanage operated in Brazos County from 1906 to 1931. Although it probably was unusual for such an institution to be located in a rural area, there were, of course, other black orphanages in Texas at this time. For example, a “Colored Orphans Home” was operating in San Antonio by 1899, and St. Johns Industrial Home for Black Orphans opened in Austin in 1907.¹ Obviously, the statement in the **New Handbook of Texas** that Dickson’s Colored Orphanage at Gilmer “from 1900 to 1929 was the only orphanage for black children in Texas” is incorrect.²

Attempts to locate the records of this institution have, as yet, proven unsuccessful, as have efforts to find persons who lived at the orphanage. Thus, there is a certain amount of uncertainty about its history. Nonetheless, the available information provides a good overview of the operations of this agency.

The Brazos County orphanage was originally conceived of as a non-denominational “rescue home,” which would assist children (and perhaps women) who needed help. The idea for such an institution first appears in the fall of 1905, when Reverend K.W. Hardy, pastor of a local African Methodist Episcopal Church “and others” (not named) urged the creation of a “colored orphans’ home and industrial school.” Hardy was the state deputy for the United States Protective Society, a fraternal organization with headquarters in St. Louis.³

¹ **General Directory of the City of San Antonio 1899-1900.** San Antonio: Jules A. Appler, n.d., p.6; also see the entry for “St. Johns Community, Texas” in the **New Handbook of Texas** Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996, vol.5, p.759.

² See the entry for “Gilmer, Texas,” in the **New Handbook of Texas.** Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996, vol.3, p.172.

³ “Colored Orphanage and Industrial School,” **Bryan Morning Eagle**, 6 October 1905, p.2, col.4.

The efforts of these civic-minded citizens met with success, for the Fathers and Mothers Protection Society, located at Bryan, filed for a Texas state charter on 1 February 1906.⁴

On 26 March 1906, A.B. Thorton sold eleven acres of land to Jeff Castles, A.B. Thornton, Bob Hall, W.H. Haynes, C.C. Calhoun and Sarah A. Johnson, trustees of the Fathers and Mothers Protective Society. This property was located in the John Austin league, on the southeast line of the old Boonville town tract.⁵ Boonville had been the first county seat of Brazos County. When the railroad bypassed Boonville in the 1860s, the county seat was moved to Bryan, and Boonville dwindled to a small farming community, populated mostly by African American families.

Some of the trustees had been prominent in church affairs prior to this date, and not only Methodists supported this home. Jeff Castles, for example, had been listed as a trustee at Mount Olive Baptist Church in 1890 and as a deacon of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in 1934. W.H. Haynes was a trustee at Shiloh Baptist Church from at least 1898 to 1919.⁶

In April 1906 a short article appeared in the **Brazos Pilot**, noting that the Fathers' and Mothers' Protection Society had purchased land for the home. The article was signed, "Mrs. Texana A. Castles, Supreme Mother."⁷ Texana Castles, who had been born about 1865, was the wife of Jeff Castles; she was the mother of twelve children, only six of whom were living at the time of the 1910 census.⁸ Ms. Castles passed away in 1930; research has not revealed when her husband died.⁹

⁴ **Biennial Report of the Texas Secretary of State for 1906**, Austin, Texas: Von Boeckmann-Jones Co., 1907, p.23.

⁵ **Brazos County Deed Records Book 26**, p.402. Mr. A.B. Thorton passed away in 1932 ("Bryan Briefs," **Houston Informer**, 30 January 1932, p.5, col.1)

⁶ **Brazos County Deed Book 7**, p.587 (1 September 1890) lists Jeff Castles as a trustee of Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church; **Brazos County Mechanics Lien Book G**, pp.157-158 (1934) lists Castles as a deacon of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Bryan. **Brazos County Deed Book 21**, p.4 (15 November 1898) lists W.H. Haynes as a trustee of Shiloh Baptist Church; other deeds list him as holding that same position through the years, the last that has been found is dated 1919 and is recorded in **Brazos County Deed Book 48**, pp.584-585.

⁷ **Brazos Pilot**, 5 April 1906, p.4

⁸ Jeff Castles married Texana Childress on 2 May 1885 (**Brazos County Marriage Records**, Book F, p.272); also **1910 Brazos County Census**, ED 8, p.7b (printed page 181)

⁹ "Bryan Briefs," **Houston Informer**, 22 November 1930, p.8, col.4

The society held groundbreaking ceremonies at the future site of the rescue home on 1 September 1906. In addition to speakers, a big barbecue was held.¹⁰ It is not clear how quickly construction actually started on the home, because the actual cornerstone was not laid until the summer of the following year.

The Society quickly realized the utility of seeking white support, and in October 1906 appointed Mr. Beverly Thornton, an African American farmer, a committee of one to work toward that goal. Mr. Thornton, a Louisiana native, had been born about 1862. He held a meeting at the Brazos County Court House on Monday, October 29, 1906, at which time he explained the plans for the rescue home. While whites endorsed the society's efforts, it is not clear how much white support the home ever received.¹¹

In March 1907, a local paper reported that work was "progressing nicely on the colored rescue home" near Boonville. Again, there was strong religious support for the home; that same article mentions the involvement of Reverend Walton Brown, pastor of Lee Chapel Methodist Church in Bryan.¹² The purpose of the home was to "rescue colored boys and girls that are going wrong, take them to the home, teach them in their books and in useful industrial pursuits and try to make of them good men and women."

At about this same time, Reverend Brown was raising money to construct a new building for Lee Chapel.¹³ Brown must have been quite a hard worker, as well as an effective leader.

Official ceremonies marking the laying of the home's corner stone were held in July 1907. Mr. Palmiston "Pal" Landry and E.W. Knox were in charge of those activities. The Rose of Sharon and Aquilla Lodges of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows conducted appropriate rituals at this event.¹⁴

Palmiston Landry, who was principal of the Bryan public school for African American children, came from a well-known African American family in Louisiana; his father, Dr. Pierre Landry, in 1868 had been the first African American mayor of the town of Donaldsonville and later served as dean of Gilbert Academy, a Methodist college in

¹⁰ **Brazos Pilot**, 23 August 1906, p.2.

¹¹ **Brazos Pilot**, 25 October 1906, p.5. **1910 Brazos County, Texas, Census**, ED 8, sheet 2a, p.176

¹² "Colored Rescue Home," **Brazos Pilot**, 14 March 1907, p.5, col.6.

¹³ "Opening of the New Lee Chapel," (weekly) **Bryan Eagle**, 2 May 1907, p.1, col.5

¹⁴ "The corner stone of the Colored Rescue Home...", (weekly) **Bryan Eagle**, 25 July 1907, p.3, col.4; also "Corner Stone Laying," (weekly) **Brazos Pilot**, 25 October 1906, p.10, col.1.

Baldwin, Louisiana. Pal's brother Oscar had been principal of a school in Navasota, Texas, in the 1890s.¹⁵

In 1909 managers of the rescue home rented about 19 acres to grow additional crops, giving them a total of about 30 acres for their use. Items that they cultivated included 20½ acres of cotton, eight acres of corn, three acres of sorghum, one acre each of sweet potatoes, peas, peanuts, and "unspecified vegetables," plus ½ acre of watermelons. No explanation has been found for the discrepancy between the amount of land said to be used in growing crops (roughly 35 acres) and the amount of land known to be under the control of the orphanage (about 30 acres). It is possible that a nearby land owner allowed them the free use of some land or that the institution rented additional land not noted in any source yet found. While residents of the home would have consumed many of these goods, obviously some (such as the cotton) were intended as cash crops. Mrs. T.A. Castles, of Bryan, was still in charge of the rescue home at that time. This article suggests that some adult women were then living at the home, although this has not been verified in other sources.¹⁶

The 1910 census provides the earliest list of the persons in the care of the rescue home.¹⁷ At that time there were nine children living at the orphanage, to wit:

Palmer, Henderson	29		farmer
, Mary E.	27	his wife	teacher in rescue home
Castles, Robert	5	son	
Barnett, Ona	19	female	boarder
Banks, Velma	14	female	boarder
Fleming, William	14	male	boarder
Moore, Gladys	12	female	boarder
Tucker, Josephine	12	female	boarder
Johnson, Annie	10	female	boarder
Green, Viola	6	female	boarder
Bailey, Anna	2	female	boarder
McMean (?), Bobbie	8/12	female.	boarder

¹⁵ P. Landry was promoted to principal of the Bryan school; see: **Bryan Daily Eagle**, 11 January 1901, p.3, col.3. "Dr. Pierre Landry, dean of Gilbert Industrial College of Baldwin, La., visited his son, P. Landry of Bryan....," (weekly) **Bryan Eagle**, 8 June 1905, p.5, col.2. Also see household of Pierre Landry, **1880 Ascension Parish, Louisiana, Census**, 3rd Ward, page 75b; and household of Palmiston Landry, **1900 Brazos County Census**, ED 9, sheet 10a, printed p.277a. Mr. P. Landry's brother, Oscar, was principal of the Navasota "colored" school; see: **Bryan Daily Eagle**, 13 May 1896, p.4, col.1, and 16 May 1896, p.4, col.2

¹⁶ "Bryan's Colored Rescue Home," **Bryan Daily Eagle**, 29 June 1909, p.1, col.3.

¹⁷ **1910 Brazos County Census**, ED 8, sheet 2a, printed p.176, precinct 4.

Perhaps Mrs. Mary E. (Castles) Palmer was related to Jeff and Texana A. Castles (the founder of the home) – more research needs to be done in this area.

On 17 February 1913, a meeting of the Fathers and Mothers Protection Society, incorporated, was held in the home of Reverend D.H. Shivers in Bryan. At that meeting, a quorum of the group's officers, including Reverend Shivers, president; C.C. Calhoun, J.H. Castles, Mrs. T.A. Castles, and A.R. Griggs, decided to sell the society's land to the Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention of Texas.¹⁸ Shivers, who died in 1927, served as pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Bryan for 50 years.¹⁹

In November 1917, the operators of the orphanage decided to augment its land holdings. At that time, the Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention of Texas purchased 32 acres of land in the John Austin tract on the Bryan and Harvey Road from C.S. Jones.²⁰ This gave the orphanage total holdings of 43 acres of land. The land cost \$1280. The Baptist convention was able to pay \$426.66 at the time of purchase and signed notes agreeing to pay the remainder in four equal payments, due in 1918, 1919, 1920 and 1921.

Most likely this land was purchased so that the orphanage could stop renting land to grow crops. In addition to the items listed in the 1909 article, later stories mention the orphans growing such dietary staples as Irish potatoes, lettuce, onions, pumpkins, turnips, and tomatoes.²¹

The **1920 Brazos County Census** lists Reverend Tilmond H. Green(e) as the head of the orphanage, with Ms. Catherin [sic] Washington serving as its teacher.²² Nineteen children were then housed at the institution. The census entries, which suggest the presence of some groups of siblings, are difficult to read.

Greene, Tilmond H.	52	male	minister, Baptist church
Ella L.	36	his wife	
James L.	27	his son	
Jennie	14	his daughter	
McFalls, Gaines	14	male	inmate

¹⁸ **Brazos County Deed Records Book 42**, pp.384-386, 22 April 1913.

¹⁹ "Shivers Will Be Buried Thursday," **Bryan Daily Eagle**, 1 November 1927, p.2, col.6

²⁰ **Brazos County Deed Records Book 46**, pp.198-199.

²¹ "Some Turnip is Raised by the Negro Orphans," **Bryan Weekly Eagle**, 11 February 1926, p.1, col.1; also: "Bryan Orphan Home Appeals for Assistance," **Houston Informer**, 22 November 1930, p.6, col.4; also: "Brazos Negro Farmers Increase Feed Crop Average 25 Per Cent," **Bryan Weekly Eagle**, 22 May 1930, p.5

²² **1920 Brazos County Census**, ED 12, sheet 5b.

, Jessie	12	male	inmate
, Oscar	9	male	inmate
Williams, Pearle	15	female	inmate
, Corine	14	female	inmate
, Laurine	14	female	inmate
, Christine	12	female	inmate
, James	11	male	inmate
Dean, Viola	15	female	inmate
Hall, Ernestine	15	female	inmate
, Erma R.	14	female	inmate
Jannetta J.	12	female	inmate
Smith, Lucile	8	female	inmate
Hawkins, Luelley (?)	5	male	inmate
Murphy, Costella (?)	10	male	inmate
Alford (?), Jannetta	10	female	inmate
Moffit, Pauline	10	female	inmate
, Calvin	9	male	inmate
, Christine	8	female	inmate
Washington, Catherin	33	female	teacher

Reverend T.H. Green, the minister in charge of this orphanage, died in 1924. His obituary noted that he had been superintendent of the home for eight years and that he passed away after being ill only a few days. His funeral was held at Shiloh Baptist Church in Bryan, and his body was then shipped to Green's former home at Weimar, Texas, for burial.²³

Reverend E.M. Griggs took over running the orphanage after the death of Green. Griggs quickly realized that financial problems threatened the continued existence of the orphanage, and by 1925 began issuing appeals through the state's newspapers for support.²⁴ Part of those difficulties resulted from an increase in the number of orphans housed in the institution. In 1924, there had been only eight boys and girls in attendance

²³ "Superintendent of Colored Orphanage at Boonville Dead," **Bryan Daily Eagle**, 25 October 1924, p.1, col.3. "Tillman Green" is listed in the **1910 Colorado County, Texas, Census**, ED 24, sheet 6, p.82, as being a widowed 43-year-old Baptist minister, with sons named James L. and Eldridge S., a daughter named Jennie J., and a mother-in-law named Mrs. Joeana Baty, so apparently Rev. Green had remarried sometime after that census.

²⁴ "Colored Home in Need of Funds," **Bryan Weekly Eagle**, 12 November 1925, p.2, col.5. This is apparently the "M. Griggs," a preacher listed in the **1910 Anderson County, Texas, Census**, ED 6, sheet 7, p.87. That census lists his family as living in the town of Palestine. His household included his wife Sarah, who was a college teacher, and also lists their two children, Ethel and Earl.

there, but by November 1925 that number had increased to fourteen children, ranging in age from 15 months to 16 years.²⁵

Griggs made a great show of parading the orphans before the “Colored Baptist Young People’s Union” who met in Brazos County in July 1927. The local newspaper noted that one of home’s former charges, Pauline Moffit, had been one of the most brilliant students at Hearne College during the previous year. Griggs chaired a committee on orphans’ homes that passed a resolution urging that the Union provide financial support to the institution. As a result an offering was collected at the meeting, raising some \$21.09 for the home, but no continuing funding was passed.²⁶

A few months later, Reverend Griggs launched a fund raising campaign for the orphanage.²⁷ In a letter published in the **Houston Informer**, an African American paper, Griggs listed the needs of the home, including money to buy wood, shoes, “union suits,” winter clothing, and foods of all kinds. He went on to say:

Housing conditions are very poor. We have been waiting and hoping that our Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention would have been able to repair the home by this time, as yet it has not given us one dollar in going on four years. Therefore, we must have repairs made on the house to make it possible for us to stay in during the winter. Fifteen or more window sashes must be had at a cost of fifty or sixty dollars; mattresses are sadly needed also.

The search for money must have consumed a good bit of Griggs’ time, for we again find him working at raising funds in March 1929. Writing in the **Houston Informer**, he said:

This is the coldest winter that we have experienced in this part of Texas in many years. We have children at the orphan home who have to be cared for: wood and coal have to be bought to keep them warm, shoes have to be bought, shoes half-soled and winter clothing provided for all, as well as the other comforts that go to sustain life.²⁸

²⁵ “Colored Baptist Orphans’ Home Shows Increase,” **Bryan Daily Eagle**, 30 June 1927, p.1, col.8

²⁶ “Colored B.Y.P.U. Convention Closes Successful Meeting Here; Election of Officers Held Today,” **Bryan Daily Eagle**, 7 July 1927, p.3; also “Last Meeting of Colored Sunday School Convention Held Wednesday Morning; Interesting Program Held,” **Bryan Daily Eagle**, 8 July 1927, p.2, col.3

²⁷ “Bryan Orphan Home Needs Many Things, Says Supt. Griggs,” **Houston Informer**, 17 November 1928, p.6, col.5. Also: “Colored Baptist Orphans Home is Conducting Drive,” **Bryan Daily Eagle**, 5 November 1927, p.4, col.3.

²⁸ “Griggs Asks Aid for Orphan Home,” **Houston Informer**, 9 March 1929, p.6, col.1

On 30 January 1930, the Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention of Texas sold the home's land and buildings to the Grand Lodge of the Colored Knights of Pythias.²⁹ Perhaps this sale occurred in the hope that the Knights of Pythias would provide better financial support than did the Baptists, but so far no documentation has been found to support that belief.

In 1930, the census shows fourteen orphans living in the home, with Emanuel M. Griggs serving as superintendent and his wife Sarah serving as the children's teacher.³⁰ The census lists:

Griggs, Emanuel M.	63 male
, Sarah A.	52 his wife
Deen, Viola	32 female
Clark, Berl (?)	15 female
Johnson, Annie	15 female
Johnson, Robert ¹	14 male
Franklin, Tommie L.	12 male
White, Fannie L.	11 female
Brigsby (?), Johnnie M.	11 female
Johnson, Jack	9 male
Echols, Lillian	8 female
Johnson, Adaline	8 female
White, Eddie F.	7 female
Echols, Clarence	6 male
Rector, Mary E.	5 female
Johnson, Emmitt E.	4 male

It is clear that the orphanage received the attention of local African American leaders. An article in 1930, for example, noted that Negro County Agent H.K. Harnsberry urged "his farmers to visit the Colored Orphan Home three miles east of Bryan where he has a demonstration plot showing the diversification plan being used in the county." He called special attention to their tomatoes, which he thought were the best in the county.³¹

As one would expect, the economic woes of the Depression impacted the perpetually troubled orphanage. In June 1930, the **Bryan Eagle** carried a story headlined, "Water Supply at Negro Orphanage Cut Off." Residents of the home were

²⁹ This transaction is mentioned in **Brazos County Deed Records Book 84**, p.294.

³⁰ **1930 Brazos County Census**, roll 2301, ED # 21-10, sheet 4a.

³¹ "Brazos Negro Farmers Increase Feed Crop Average 25 Per Cent," **Bryan Weekly Eagle**, 22 May 1930, p.5

hauling water to meet their needs due to a failure of their well. Reverend Griggs stated that the orphanage needed either \$100 in cash, or else bricks with which to reline the well.³²

In November 1930 Griggs again appealed for aid. Once more writing in the **Houston Informer**, he described the financial problems plaguing the home, and stated:

We were advised to take some of the children to the Dickson Orphan Home, which is operated for the state, but we find that we cannot place one child there. The board has ordered Mr. Crouch, superintendent, not to admit one until further orders. They are over-crowded. Hence, you see, we have to stay where we are and keep all of the children, and therefore, we are asking the friends of humanity to send us help. Sugar, flour, meal, rice, canned goods of every kind, meat and lard and money in particular to help pay the debts, would be greatly appreciated.³³

Apparently enough support was given to stave off the most immediate problems, for in December Griggs issued a statement expressing "his appreciation to citizens who responded so generously" to his call for contributions. However, that same announcement requested additional donations "toward providing seasonal pleasures for the children."³⁴

The home continued to have problems, and on 1 January 1931, Griggs wrote another letter for the Houston paper, stating:

We are again appealing to you to come to the rescue of the needy and helpless children of the Bryan Orphan Home. We need at this time fifteen or twenty pillowcases and fifteen or twenty sheets. We are very thankful to the public for what they have sent in. Provisions, such as rice, sugar, syrup, canned goods of all kinds are always accepted. Just now too we are in much need of money to close up our debts for the year.³⁵

As if the financial problems were not serious enough, a bombshell soon rocked the orphanage. In March 1931 local officials arrested Griggs on charges of statutory

³² "Water Supply at Negro Orphanage Cut Off; Well Needs Repairs But Money for Work is Not Available," **Bryan Weekly Eagle**, 26 June 1930, p.5

³³ "Bryan Orphan Home Appeals for Assistance," **Houston Informer**, 22 November 1930, p.6, col.4

³⁴ "Negro Orphanage Gives Thanks To Its Contributors," **Bryan Weekly Eagle**, 11 December 1930, p.5

³⁵ "Orphan Home Asks for Help at This Time from Public," **Houston Informer**, 3 January 1931, p.7, col.6

assault on one of the female residents of the home. No additional news stories concerning this event have been found, so it is unclear whether Griggs was able to post bond or was forced to remain in jail awaiting the action of the grand jury. When the grand jury met, they did not indict Griggs.³⁶

By the time the charges in Grigg's case were dropped, the damage to the home had already been done. Shortly after Grigg's arrest, the **Bryan Eagle** noted that an inspector from the Maternity and Children's Homes Division of the Texas Health Department was looking into the affairs of the orphanage. While the article fails to note the precise reason for the investigator's visit, it almost certainly had to do with the charge filed against Reverend Griggs. The decision was reached to close the institution, and homes were found for the eleven children then living there.³⁷

The final chapter in the history of the orphanage took place on 31 July 1933, when the Grand Lodge Colored Knights of Pythias sold the 43 acres of land to C. Edgar Jones. Jones paid \$800 for that property.³⁸

Throughout its twenty-five year history, this institution provided a safety net for local African American children, offering aid to them in times of trouble. Though its doors have been closed for more than seven decades, the Bryan Orphan Home deserves to be remembered as one of this area's early attempts to provide for those in need.

³⁶ "Head of Orphanage is Held to Grand Jury," **Bryan Weekly Eagle**, 26 March 1931, p.4, col.7; also "Many Indictments Returned by Grand Jury; Judge W.C. Davis to Fix Criminal Docket Monday," **Bryan Weekly Eagle**, 21 May 1931, p.2, col.7. Grigg's name is not listed as having been tried in **Direct Index of Criminal Minutes of District Court, Brazos County, Book A**.

³⁷ "Bryan Orphanage for Negroes to Be Closed Down," **Bryan Weekly Eagle**, 2 April 1931, p.6, col.3; also "Homes Are Found for All Orphans, Says Miss Abbott," **Bryan Weekly Eagle**, 2 April 1931, p.6, col.4

³⁸ **Brazos County Deed Records Book 84**, p.294.