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Allensworth Colony

What was the Allensworth colony?

Col. Allen Allensworth, former slave and military hero, founded the colony of Allensworth in 1908 as a utopian community where African-Americans would achieve independence and self-sufficiency.

Allensworth intended his social experiment to become a model for African-Americans throughout the country.

Independent, self-governing black communities were fashionable around the turn of the century. Booker T. Washington, the famous African-American activist and educator and himself a former slave, encouraged them, and Allensworth was a disciple of Washington's.

Col. Allensworth bought 800 acres along the Santa Fe Railroad line about nine miles east of Earlimart in the southwest corner of Tulare County. He invited 42 select settlers to begin his colony. Of those, 37 showed up.

Together they built homes, a church, a store, a school and several other community builders.

They farmed the land around Allensworth and started an experimental garden.

Their intention was to build a factory for manufacturing finished products and to establish a college.

Allensworth flourished for almost 10 years, and at its peak, it numbered 300 families as hopeful African-Americans from around the nation joined those building a self-governing, independent community.

Several things occurred to defeat the colonists: In 1914, Col. Allensworth was killed when he was run over by two motorcyclists in Monrovia in Southern California.

The town never got approval for its college, and it constantly fought a shortage of water. World War I and then a flat economy further drove residents off.

By the 1960s, the original colony's buildings had disappeared and Allensworth was home to a handful of farm laborers.

How is Allensworth connected to Martin Luther King Jr.?

Ed Pope was working in Sacramento as a draftsman and planner for the California De-

partment of Parks and Recreation in 1968 when the news broke about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

"A bunch of us were angry, and we wanted to do something violent after that, because of Martin," Pope said. "But my wife said I shouldn't get involved in anything like that.

"I had to do something, though. And I remembered Col. Allensworth and the town he founded."

With the help of a professor at California State University, Sacramento, Pope wrote a proposal to restore the Allensworth settlement as a state historical site and pitched it to the Parks Department. Finally, in 1974, Gov. Ronald Reagan authorized the department to establish the park. Col. Allensworth Historic State Park was established on 240 acres in 1976.

Challenges to the present day

Allensworth continues to battle adversity.

Lack of water and opportunity have plagued the small community for generations. The meager water source is constantly threatened and sometimes nonexistent.

About 120 families live in Allensworth now, about 90 percent of them Spanish-speaking. Most people live in converted trailers. Allensworth School, a combined elementary and charter high school, has about 100 students. The town has no store or gas station. Its community center is in shambles.

A group of Allensworth residents, including Ed Pope, longtime resident and activist Nettie Morrison, Charles Allen and Susie Rodriguez recently appealed to the Tulare County Board of Supervisors for help in establishing a community center and committee with representation.

Who was Col. Allensworth?

Col. Allen Allensworth was a role model himself. He was born into slavery in Kentucky in 1842. He saw his chance to escape during the Civil War, and he joined the Union army.

After the war, he joined the Navy, became a businessman, a teacher and finally a minister. In 1882, noting there were no black chaplains in the U.S. military, he petitioned to become one. He retired in 1906 from the military at the rank of lieutenant colonel, the highest rank of any African-American at that time.

Allensworth became a devotee of the principles of Booker T. Washington, whose philosophy was that blacks should succeed through hard work, independence and self-determination. He lectured throughout the Southwest about the principles of Washington, finally settling in Los Angeles.

Allensworth continued to lecture and promote his vision of his community.

He was preparing to preach at a small church in Monrovia when he was killed while crossing the street by two motorcyclists.

Was Col. Allensworth assassinated?

Cornelius "Ed" Pope, who initiated the drive to restore Allensworth and devotes himself to historical research about the colony, says the circumstances of Col. Allensworth's death are mysterious and that he could have been the victim of foul play.

Allensworth was crossing the street after getting off a streetcar to preach at a small church in Monrovia when two motorcycles roared straight at him down the street at 60 mph. He was run over by one of them. Pope said witnesses in some newspaper accounts said the motorcycles

turned around and ran over Allensworth a second time. Other accounts say there were several other motorcycles involved and that some of the riders got off their bikes and stomped Allensworth. "There were a lot of people who didn't want Allensworth to succeed," Pope says today.

News of Allensworth's death threw a chill into the community he founded. "People were afraid and intimidated after that," Pope says.

What's the park like now?

The state parks department has built more than 15 buildings on the original site of the colony as duplicates of the original Allensworth buildings, including a school, church, store, meeting center and the houses of many of the colony's prominent citizens, including Col. Allensworth, the Stocktons, Hacketts and Dodsons, who are ancestors of Pastor Larry Dodson of Tulare.

There are plans for more buildings, some of which are being erected now.

Three years ago, a state bond dedicated \$8 million for improvements at Allensworth, which had lain fallow for many years after its initial construction in 1976. Those projects are ongoing.

At one time, as many as 30,000 people a year visited the park, but those numbers have declined in recent years. Ed Pope believes it is because the park lacks infrastructure and amenities.

"There's no shade there. There are only a couple of bathrooms," Pope says. "There's no place to get a drink of water in the heat."

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Did you know ...

It's original name was Solito (Spanish for "home").

Allensworth's streets were all named after noted African-Americans -- abolitionists Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglas, Col. Charles Young, poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar -- abolitionists -- Harriet Beecher Stowe -- and supporters of Allensworth -- David Palmer.

No structure is permitted to be built at Allensworth park that cannot be documented as existing there between 1908 and 1920.

Col. Charles Young, a friend of Col. Allensworth, shared his distinction as the highest-ranking African-American military officer of his day. He was credited with building the road to Sequoia National Park and naming the famous General Grant and General Sherman trees. Young also named a tree for Booker T. Washington.

Interest in restoring Allensworth was first kindled by an Ebony magazine article in September 1966 entitled, "The Town That Refused to Die."

Allensworth was just the westernmost of several African-American communities established around the turn of the century in the United States. The largest and most famous was Boley, Okla., which was christened by Booker T. Washington himself in 1907. Allensworth was modeled after Boley.

Ed Pope says that motion picture directors John Singleton ("Boyz in the Hood") and Spike Lee ("Do the Right Thing," "25th Hour") have both expressed interest in making a movie about Allensworth. The obstacle is the lack of historical research.

What killed the colony?

The Allensworth area is notoriously short of water, a condition that persists to this day. Col. Allensworth picked the place for his utopia because of an abundance of wells and artesian springs.

Ed Pope says there was also a waterway, Deer Creek.

"But when the colony started going, mysteriously, Deer Creek was moved," Pope said.

Pope also blames the Santa Fe Railroad for the colony's demise. Allensworth was once the only stop in that part of the Valley, the shipping point for the Valley's cattle and grain.

"Then Santa Fe built a spur to Alpaugh, and the trains stopped coming," Pope said.

In addition, Col. Allensworth had received a promise from the Pacific Farming Co., from which he bought Allensworth's 800 acres, that the company would provide water.

The company never delivered. The wells depleted.

In 1914, a bill was being considered in the California Legislature that would have established a technical college at Allensworth modeled after Washington's Tuskegee Institute.

Two weeks after Col. Allensworth's death, the bill was defeated.

Poor crop yields, a water shortage and a flat economy eventually drove the settlers away.

Cornelius 'Ed' Pope watches over Allensworth

Ed Pope, sometimes referred to by Friends of Allensworth as "The Legend," has several curious attachments to Allensworth. Born on Jan. 11, 1930, in Wasco, Pope's parents were farm laborers who moved around the Valley. His family lived in Allensworth between 1938 and 1941, and Pope became familiar with some of the town's history.

With World War II, most people moved away from Allensworth, including Pope's family. When he came of age, Pope joined the Navy as a submariner, and later was trained as a Class A electrician, one of the first black specialists in the U.S. Navy, which previously limited service of African-Americans to seaman.

After discharge, Pope held a series of jobs, including as the only black correctional officer at Folsom State Prison and postal clerk. He took night classes and became a draftsman, finally landing a job with the state Department of Parks and Recreation as a landscape draftsman and surveyor. It was in that position that Pope conceived of the idea restoring Allensworth as a state historic park.

Pope left the parks department in 1975, just as the park was being established, over a dispute on how it was being developed. He worked at various jobs, including dealing blackjack in Las Vegas. In 1989, shortly after his wife died, he returned to Allensworth, where he now lives.

He is a docent at Allensworth and works at compiling the colony's historical records and artifacts.

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