

Source Materials on the Origins of the “Dominicker Settlement” in Holmes County, Florida

The following notes contain what little documentation I have been able to find for the origins of the "Dominicker" families in Holmes County and environs. I am assuming without proof that the Joe Thomas mentioned below was the father of the Mulatto children in the household of Jane Thomas (White) on the 1850 Holmes census; but much more research is needed here; the youngest three may be grandchildren. The articles, though confused in some details, seem to indicate that there were originally at least three mixed-race families in the area who intermarried, perhaps four or more.

For ease of reference, I have numbered the various stories of the Dominickers' origins, as shown below in brackets and bold red font.—WCH, 10 September 2006.

+++++

The following is an article published in 1939 in the Florida volume¹ of the Federal Writer's Project state guide series. One of Franklin D. Roosevelt's many Works Progress Administration projects to alleviate unemployment during the Great Depression, the FWP relied on the contributions of thousands of anonymous local writers, many of them unemployed writers, editors, and white-collar workers, to provide a comprehensive social and historical picture of the nation.

PONCE DE LEON, 45.2m (64 alt, 382 pop), is the site of Ponce De Leon Springs, one of the many fountains of youth named for the Spanish explorer. In adjacent back country live 'Dominickers,' part Negro and part white, whose history goes back to the early 1860s. **[Origin story #1A—Thomas family]** Just before the War between the States, Thomas, a white, lived on a plantation here, with his wife, two children, and several Negro slaves. After his death his wife married one of the slaves, by whom she had five children. As slaves often took the name of their masters, her Negro husband was also known as Thomas. Of the five children, three married whites, two married Negroes. Today their numerous descendants live in the backwoods, for the most part in poverty.

The men are of good physique, but the women are often thin and worn in early life. All have large families, and the fairest daughter may have a brother distinctly Negroid in appearance. The name originated, it is said, when a white in suing for a divorce described his wife as 'black and white, like an old Dominicker chicken.' Dominickers children are not permitted to attend white schools, nor do they associate with Negroes. About 20 children attend a one-room school. As no rural bus is provided, he pupils often walk several miles to attend classes. An old cemetery, containing a large number of Dominicker graves, adjoins the school.

Numerous curves and steep hills make driving west of Ponce de Leon somewhat dangerous; care and caution are advised.

¹ Federal Writers' Project (Fla.). *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*. Sponsored by the State of Florida Department of Public Instruction. New York: Oxford University Press, 1939.

The following are transcripts of two unpublished, anonymous articles written for the Florida volume of the Federal Writers Project state guide series in the late 1930's; they were probably used as source material for the published article quoted above. I have not corrected spelling or typographical errors. The original typescripts are in the library of the University of Florida at Gainesville, from which transcriptions were obtained and sent to me via e-mail by a correspondent.—WCH, 10 September 2006.

TYPESCRIPT 1: THE DOMINECKER SETTLEMENT

The Dominecker [sic] Settlement is located in Holmes County, about half way between Westville and Ponce de Leon, Florida. Westville prides itself on being the twon that made boot-leg liquor famous, and the Domineckers owned and operated the stills. Ponce de Leon is a small village - a trading post for farmers. During the time that lumber and turpentine were leading industries, the town thrived. Now, a small sawmill employs a few people and cull lumber is shipped to the paper mill at Panama City. People trade one product for another and there is very little money spent. The town derives its name from a small spring on the Pea River, called Ponce de Leon Springs. The spring claims to be the original "Fountain of Youth" discovered by Ponce de Leon.

The Domineckers live in their little settlement and have few outside interests. The children are not allowed to attend the white schools. For a child from the settlement to attend school was unheard of until 10 years ago, their efforts to enter their children in school caused such an upheaval, the school board finally compromised by establishing a grammar school for them. A few exceptions have been made in Westville for high school students, but they are never allowed to actually graduate. Two families have moved to Shamrock, Florida to send the children to a white school.

The Domineckers attend the Mt. Zion Baptist Church. It is supposed to be a white church, they are allowed to go to any church to "preaching" but cannot take a part in church affairs. They seldom attend any services but their own - unless it is a holiness revival.

These people are sensitive, treacherous and vindictive. They never start a disturbance but if any one bothers them – the whole family will do childish things to get revenge, to steal a hog or mutilate a crop is as good as a want. They are pathetically ignorant and en entire family will work hard for little compensation.

The Domineckers come to town once a week for supplies. Their dilapidated wagons are drawn by anemic looking oxen. Each wagon is literally spilling over with children. They attend their business quickly and quietly and leave as unceremoniously as they came. They are treated with the same courtesy that a Negro receives - never served at a public fountain nor introduced to a white person. It would be ridiculous to prefix "Mr." or "Mrs." to their names.

The Domineckers differ in size but they are practically the same type. Their skin is dark, swarthy and thick looking; some have medium skin with big brown freckles, their eyes are brown and sharp, usually deep-set. They have beautiful white teeth and bright pink gums. Most of them have black straight hair, none of them have real kinky hair and one family has three children that are decided blonds – their skin looks sun-burned. They are a type of people that age quickly, probably from lack of care. The men are big and burly looking, noted for their strength and famous for "halter breaking" calves and horses.

The women are low in stature, fat and shapeless, they wear loose-fitting clothes and no shoes. One woman 74 years of age has never owned a pair of shoes. When a person is the smaller type his is almost dwarf-like in size. There seems to be no in-between size. The people move from one hut to another, often living alone for awhile and then moving back into the family group. Men, women and children work in the fields. Some houses are scrupulously clean while others are filthy. They just live from day to day - certainly not an ambitious group. Each generation marries into the lower class of white people, their original group will soon be extinct. Common law marriage is practiced, as a matter of fact - most of them "take-up" with each other.

Local people claim that the Domineckers are 95% Negro. This statement is absurd. They are about three fourths white and one eighth Negro and one eighth Indian.

[Origin story #2—Euchee Indians] Jim Crow, the oldest son of Sam Story, Chief of the Euchee Indians, married a servant girl that was two thirds white. Her name was Harriet, she came to Walton County with the McLendon family. [Actually, the McKinnons, per other published sources—WCH] When the Euchee Indians left Walton County to go the Everglades, Jim Crow led the tribe. This was three weeks after the "Big Chief's" death. Harriet refused to go with the tribe so she and her baby daughter were left behind with the McLendon family. Years later this child married a yellow boy from Freeport, Florida. He was the son of a servant that came from South Carolina with the McLain family. Their descendants married into another half-breed family. **[Origin story #3—Plantation owner]** One white man was the sole heir to a plantation, after the Civil War. This was in Holmes County. One family of slaves remained on the plantation and the owner had four children by one of the daughters. He is supposed to have married the Negro woman but there are nor records to prove it.

[Origin story #4—Simmons family] In 1837, during the Indian War, the whites drove the Indians into Alabama, near River Falls, and captured a squaw and little baby and a boy about eight years old. The squaw strangled the baby during the night and disappeared. Later she was seen with three Indian men, one of these was killed but the others escaped and it is supposed that they joined the Creek Indians and went to Texas. The white men brought the Indian boy home, he was about 30 years old at the time of the Civil War and fought with his white friends. Wht white men named him Henry Simmons, his widow and eight of their nine children live at Ponce de Leon. The Simmons woman claims to be white but a Negro man living nearby claims they have the same grandmother. However, they refuse to associate with Negroes, but they ride in Negro coaches and use Negro waiting rooms.

The Simmons family are proud of their Indian blood. They try to follow the old customs and hunt with sling-shots and bows and arrows. They do some of their cooking out in the yard and eat meat and fish about half raw. Every year they plan to pay tribute to their forefathers, but this ceremony has never been performed - before Henry's death the family often visited Indians.

About 20 years ago, the people in the settlement were just "mixed breeds" - living their own lives and practically unnoticed, until a white man and a white woman were divorced and the mother had custody of their one child. Later the woman married one of the men from the settlement. The white man did not want the child to live in such surroundings so he employed a lawyer to gain legal custody of the child. The case was tried in the Walton County Court - the father explained the case by saying that his former wife had married a "black and white man - just plain black and white like a common Dominecker Chicken."

He gained full custody of the child and the people in the settlement, much to their distress, are still called "Domineckers."

TYPESCRIPT 2: THE DOMINICKER SETTLEMENT

[Origin story #1B—Thomas and Bland families] The beginning of the Dominicker Settlement was before the Civil War in 1855 by a black man named Joe Thomas. A slave raised a family of four children one boy and three girls, by a white woman named Polly Thomas. She owned the black man and after her husband was killed she took her slave for a husband and raised the four children. Their son Berrian Thomas married a white woman named Rally Hall. Their daughter named Martha Thomas married a white man named Bill Bland. The other two girls raised a family of children without being married for different colored men.

How they got their name Dominicker. As they were mixed with both white and colored, the white people and better class of colored named them Dominicker, as they were born and raised here. The white citizens would not allow them to be classed with them, and neither would the Dominickers go with the colored and they have know by the name of Dominicker from 1860.

Some years later a school was established as the Dominicker school, six miles east of Ponce de Leon where they have been until today. They are not allowed to go to white schools and neither will they attend colored schools or churches. So they are off to themselves but the sorry poor class of white people marry them but some of them are ignorant until today. Some can't read, neither can they write.