

Dominickers

Subjects: Others

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The Dominickers are a small biracial or triracial ethnic group that was once centered in the Florida Panhandle county of Holmes, in a corner of the southern part of the county west of the Choctawhatchee River, near the town of Ponce de Leon. The group was classified in 1950 as one of the "reputed Indian-White-Negro racial isolates of the Eastern United States" by the United States Census Bureau. Few facts are known about their origins, and little has been published about this group.

Keywords: triracial ; biracial ; panhandle

1. First Mention and Origins

The first known mention in print of the Dominickers' existence is an article in *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, published by the Federal Writers' Project in 1939. The article "Ponce de Leon" identifies the Dominickers as being descendants of the widow of a pre-Civil War plantation owner and one of her black slaves, by whom she had five children. (A separate oral tradition has it that the slave was the mulatto half-brother of the woman's deceased husband, but this has not been verified.)^[1]

The unsigned article said that numerous descendants still lived in the area at the time of writing, and their children attended a segregated school (as required by Florida's Jim Crow laws). Dominickers were not accepted as social equals by the white community, but they did not associate with the black community, either. The Dominickers formed a small middle layer of Holmes County society separate from both whites and blacks (somewhat analogous to the status of Louisiana Creoles before the United States purchase of the Louisiana Territory).^[1]

According to the article, their appearance varied from very fair (white) to "Negroid" (black), even among the siblings of a single family. It also says the pejorative nickname "Dominickers" originated when a local man in a divorce case described his estranged wife as "black and white, like an old Dominicker chicken." Another account says the description applied to the man with whom she was living.^[1]

2. Further Sources

Two unpublished typescripts^[1] prepared for the FWP Florida guidebook, but not included in it, are now archived at the University of Florida library in Gainesville. They were likely sources or drafts of the published article.

These typescripts go into further detail than the published article on the appearance and behavior of the Dominickers, calling them as "sensitive, treacherous, and vindictive" and "pathetically ignorant." The men are described as "big and burly looking," known for their skill at breaking horses and making moonshine whiskey. The women, however, are much less kindly described as "low in stature, fat, and shapeless," wearing loose clothing and going barefoot all the time.^[1]

One article notes that Dominickers were "treated with the same courtesy that a Negro receives—never served at a public fountain nor introduced to a white person." A few Dominicker children were allowed to attend the white high school in Westville, but they were "never allowed to actually graduate."^[1]

In contrast to these descriptions, photographs of known Dominickers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries show that their appearance ranged from fair-complected to swarthy, but not "Negroid," as claimed; the women, especially, seem to have had an olive-skinned, wavy-haired "Mediterranean" look. One scholarly writer, a native of the area, states, "Most of these people are Spanish or Cuban in appearance."^[2]

3. Native American Ancestry

The typescripts give five different accounts of the Dominickers' origins, which are said to include Euchee Indian ancestors, suggesting there were originally several distinct mixed-race families in the area in various combinations of white, black, and Indian blood, descendants of whom intermarried, all of them eventually being considered Dominickers. One typescript says, "they are about three-fourths white and one-eighth Negro and one-eighth Indian."^[1]

For example, one story that can be pieced together from the typescripts as well as from some more reliable published sources,^[2] says that Jim Crow (no connection with the segregation laws called by that name), an "Indian prince," son of Chief Sam Story of the local Euchee Indians, married Harriet, a beautiful, "more than two-thirds white" house servant belonging to a local white family; they produced a daughter, Eliza. When the Eucheas migrated to southern Florida in 1832, shortly after Sam Story's death, Harriet (who may have been her owner's daughter) and the baby stayed behind with the white family. When Eliza grew up, she married a "yellow boy" (mulatto) named Jim Harris, son of a slave belonging to another white family. Their daughter, Lovey, eventually married another "yellow boy" and had a large family of good-looking children, who "married into another half-breed family." It is also said that other Eucheas besides Jim Crow left many descendants (presumably mixed-race) in the area.^[1]

4. Census Records

Federal censuses of Holmes and the adjacent counties of Walton and Washington dating back to 1850 list many Dominicker families and individuals, variously identified as white, mulatto, and black (even among members of the same family). Classifications for a given individual often changed from one census to the next, as they were dependent on the opinion of the census enumerator. The census records show that in the decades following the Civil War many Dominickers married white spouses, and their children had even more white ancestry.

The 1950 federal census instructed enumerators to make note of local populations of mixed white, black, and Indian ancestry in the eastern United States. In Holmes County, Florida, and nowhere else, 60 Dominickers were so counted although they were designated as white on the census.

In 1956, a United States Public Health Service worker, who had tabulated the 1950 census findings, made a brief visit to the area and interviewed some white residents. He was unable to make contact with any Dominickers, said to number about 40 at that time. His field notes indicate that at least one Dominicker claimed to be of Spanish and Indian descent. He also noted that "the term Dominicker is not acceptable to the group and is not used in their presence."^[1]

5. Dispersal and Assimilation

At some point in the 1960s, following the US Supreme Court decision in *Brown v Board of Education*, the black school in Ponce de Leon was closed, and students of color were integrated into the other local public schools. Some descendants of the Dominicker group still live in the area, but since World War II, many have scattered to other parts of the country. Those remaining in Holmes County and nearby localities have quietly assimilated into the white community, and there is no organized affiliation of Dominicker descendants.

6. Similar Groups in the Region

The Dominickers are sometimes given a brief mention in sources^[4] discussing Melungeon people; however, there is no known link between the Dominickers and any other mixed-race group.

One source says that about 1857, over 100 mixed-race families migrated by wagon train from Holmes County to Rapides and Vernon parishes in Louisiana, where they became part of the people known as Redbones.^[5] The Redbones are well known in southwestern Louisiana, though their origins are still debated. A few links by marriage between members of that group and relatives of the Holmes County Dominickers are known, but there is no evidence at this time to suggest a common origin for the two groups.

Many families in the Holmes County area claim Native American descent, especially from the Creek Indians, a nation with whom the Euchee were once affiliated. The local Choctawhatchee Creek are organized and said to be seeking state recognition.^[6]

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