

# The Dominickers of Holmes County, Florida

## Author's Note

*This revised version of an article originally written by me in August 2006 represents the summation of what I could find in published and unpublished sources about the so-called Dominicker community of Holmes County, Florida, with the generous help of other family historians distantly related to me in the Bland, Goddin, and Simmons lines. It seems that very little has ever been published about these biracial or triracial families who apparently, judging by the sources cited, arose spontaneously from intermarriages between the races there in Holmes County before and after the Civil War. I found no connections with other triracial groups.*

*However, I did not conduct an exhaustive search for other sources, and I am not a trained ethnologist or historian. Much remains to be discovered about the racial origins of this group, and my conclusions in this paper should be taken as tentative, not final. Based upon a single, obscure remark made to me as a child, that my grandmother's people "had some Spanish blood," I suspect that to be the case; it's noteworthy that researcher Calvin Beale reported that one Dominicker man claimed to be of Spanish and Indian descent, and scholar Ralph D. Howell noted that they had a "Spanish or Cuban appearance," which is also apparent to me in photographs of some Dominicker families. Nevertheless, this merely a subjective judgment, confirmed by no evidence that I could find.*

*Although racial issues were once paramount in Southern society, we now live in a very different time. The race of one's ancestors should no longer be any kind of stigma, but a matter of pride, and I make this information available so that those who want to know the facts about their ancestry can avail themselves of it. It is also my hope that other researchers, better trained and skilled than I, will one day trace this story of the Dominickers further back and bring more facts to light about their origins, and about the social dynamics of racial and ethnic identity in antebellum Holmes County – which remained a backwater and something of a frontier area down to the mid-twentieth century, and obviously did not fit the picture of the lily-white, moonlight-and-magnolias South as portrayed in popular works of fiction.*

*I am glad I was able to compile the few sources available to me into this account, and thereby preserve for the record a tiny piece of the great jigsaw puzzle of American history. My grateful thanks go to those other researchers and correspondents who helped make it possible, and to Wilda Murphy of the Holmes County genealogical website for kindly making a home for these materials.*

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# **The Dominickers of Holmes County, Florida**

William C. Hood

The Dominickers were a group of biracial and triracial families who originated before the Civil War and were concentrated 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 as one of the “reputed Indian-White-Negro racial isolates of the Eastern United States” by the United States Census Bureau in 1950 (Beale, “Estimated”). A few scholarly articles have also from time to time made brief mention of their existence (Beale, “American”; also identified on the map accompanying the Price article).

The Dominickers are noteworthy because of their persistence from before the Civil War until the 1960s as a group distinct from both the white and black populations around them. However, since descendants of these families have frequently married outside the group and retain few, if any, physical or cultural differences from the surrounding population, it may be debatable whether the descendants still constitute an ethnic group at all. Few facts are known about their origins, and little scholarly research has been done on this group; nevertheless, there are some published sources from which information can be gleaned.

## **First Mention, Origin, and Status**

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. One of many New Deal projects undertaken to mitigate the effects of the Great Depression, the FWP hired thousands of unemployed writers, editors, and white-collar workers across the country to compile local histories. 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. (It could be, as is said about another family in the area, that the slave was actually the mulatto half-brother of the woman’s deceased husband, but this has not been verified.) According to the article, three of the children married whites, while the others married blacks; the appearance of their descendants varied from very fair to “Negroid,” even among the siblings of a single family.

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The unsigned article states 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 refused to associate with the black community, even though they were compelled to "ride in Negro coaches and use Negro waiting rooms." (Federal Writers' Project, "The Dominicker/ Dominecker Settlement") Thus, 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 of color), a rare thing in the strict black/white social dichotomy of the rural South before the Civil Rights Movement of the postwar period. This distinct racial identity made them notable as a "triracial isolate" in sociological terms, but has disappeared in recent decades.

### **Origin of the Term**

The article says the pejorative nickname "Dominickers" originated when a local man in a Walton County divorce case described his estranged wife as "black and white, like an old Dominicker chicken" (FWP, *Florida*). An unpublished FWP account from the late 1930s says that "about 20 years ago," the court case arose after the couple divorced and the first husband sued for custody of their child; the description applied to the woman's second husband. The group's nickname stuck, "much to their distress" (FWP, "Dominicker"). On the other hand, yet another unpublished account says, "As they were mixed with both white and colored, the white people and better class of colored named them Dominicker," and "they have [been known] by the name of Dominicker from 1860" ((FWP, "Dominicker").

### **Church, Cemetery, and School**

However the term arose, for much of the twentieth century, two small institutions maintained a distinct Dominicker identity. From at least the early years of the twentieth century, and very possibly before that, most Dominicker families attended Mt. Zion Baptist Church, a few miles east of Ponce de Leon, and the adjoining cemetery contains many Dominicker graves. The original wooden church building also served as an elementary school for Dominicker children until a new one-room school was built for them a couple of miles closer to Ponce de Leon, sometime in the late 1940's or early 1950's. It was abandoned in the late 1960's and is now used as a farm shed.

The original church/school building became dilapidated and was torn down in the early 1960's, being replaced with a modest concrete block structure in 1968, now called Old Mt. Zion Baptist Church, which is still in regular use.

### **Further Sources**

Two unpublished typescripts prepared for the FWP Florida guidebook, but not included in it, are now archived at the University of Florida library in Gainesville, and were probably the sources for the published article. These articles would have been written between the founding of the FWP in 1935 and the publication of the completed Florida guidebook in 1939. More so than the published article, these are highly derogatory of the Dominickers and would be considered racist by modern standards, providing a glimpse into the highly biased attitudes of local whites at the time. For that reason, their descriptions are perhaps not to be taken too literally.

### **Appearance and Behavior**

These typescripts (FWP, "Dominicker") go into further detail than the published article on the appearance and behavior of the Dominickers, calling them "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 (a clear, highly potent variety known locally as "white lightning"). The women, however, are much less kindly described as "thin and worn" or "low in stature, fat, and shapeless," wearing loose clothing and going barefoot all the time.

As one of these writers describes, "The Dominickers 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." The writer goes on to say that Dominickers were "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." A few Dominicker children were allowed to attend the white high school in Westville, but they were "never allowed to actually graduate."

Photographs of people of known Dominicker descent taken in the late 19th and early 20th centuries show that their appearance ranged from fair-complected to swarthy; the women, especially, seem to have had an olive-skinned, wavy-haired, Mediterranean look, much more attractive than the typescript authors' description suggests, and not "Negroid," as claimed. Indeed, as one scholarly writer, a native of the area, has observed, "Most of these people are Spanish or Cuban in appearance" (Howell 305), which raises the question of whether there might be some as-yet undocumented Latin blood in their ancestry. Unfortunately, family historians have not yet been able to trace these families much further back than the 1850 census.

### **Native American Ancestry**

The typescripts give five different accounts of the Dominickers' origins, which are said to include Euchee Indian ancestors (also spelled Uchee or Yuchi). The existence of a variety of accounts of their beginnings suggests that there were originally several distinct mixed-race families in the area with various combinations of white, black, and Indian blood, descendants of whom intermarried, all of them eventually being considered Dominickers. One typescript states firmly that "they are about three-fourths white and one-eighth Negro and one-eighth Indian."

For example, one rather romantic story that can be pieced together from the typescripts as well as from some more reliable published sources, says that an "Indian prince" named Jim Crow (Carswell, *Holmesteading*, 26) (no connection with the segregation laws called by that name), "a tall, agile, stately, manly fellow" (McKinnon 62) eldest son of Chief Sam Story of the local Euchee Indians, fell deeply in love with Harriet, an intelligent, beautiful, blue-eyed "house servant," "more than two-thirds white," (McKinnon 63) who came to Walton County in 1826 from North Carolina with the family of Col. John L. McKinnon, an early settler. After gaining the consent of Harriet's owners, the couple "jumped a broom" in the chief's great tent and were married "according to the Euchee custom." Jim Crow and Harriet (who remained a slave) took up residence near the McKinnon house in a cottage built for them "at the end of the row of the Negro quarters," where they lived happily and produced a daughter, Eliza (McKinnon 64).

When the Eucheas migrated to southern Florida in 1832, shortly after Sam Story's death, Harriet and Eliza stayed behind with the McKinnons. When Eliza grew up, she married a "yellow boy" (mulatto) named Jim Harris, son of a "servant" who came from South Carolina with another

white family, the McLains. Their daughter, Lovey, married another “yellow boy” named Walton Potter about 1875; together, they had a large family of good-looking children who “married into another half-breed family,” not named. (McKinnon 96-97) It is also said that other Eucheas besides Jim Crow left many descendants, some “of Yuchi aristocracy,” in the area (Carswell, *Holmesteading*, 28).

In 2001, a controversy arose when some residents objected to naming the new South Walton High School after Chief Sam Story, whose given name was Timpoochee Kinnard. A Fort Walton Beach newspaper story about the controversy contains this intriguing but unsourced statement: “A Euchee Indian, Kinnard’s son, Jim Crow, married Harriet McKinnon, the daughter of Scottish Col. Neill [sic] McKinnon. Col. McKinnon was one of the original settlers of Walton County” (Wright). Thus it may well be that Harriet’s descendants share some Scottish ancestry with the prominent McKinnon line, and could also help explain why Harriet chose to stay behind, even in slavery, when her husband led the tribe to new territory.

### **Census Records and Field Notes**

Federal and state censuses of Holmes and the adjacent counties of Walton and Washington dating back to 1850 list many individuals descended from the families named in the FWP articles, and they are variously designated as white, mulatto, and black, the racial designation varying even among members of the same family. The designation for a given individual often changes from one census to the next; some handwritten census designations seem to show evidence of being erased and overwritten with a different designation, usually “white.”

In the 19th century, once a local census had been taken, and before the final enumeration was sent to Washington, a copy was left in public view “for the inspection of all concerned,” often at the county courthouse, “for the purpose of correcting [the] enumeration by striking out or adding the designation of persons improperly enumerated or omitted.” (Magnuson). It may be that this common practice was the source of the apparent changes in racial designations in some Holmes County census records.

The census records demonstrate that in the decades following the Civil War many of the so-called Dominickers, despite their segregated status, often married into white families, thus making it difficult for researchers today to determine precise boundaries for inclusion in the Dominicker

group. Furthermore, the Holmes County courthouse burned in 1870 and again in 1902, thus destroying many original records of the 19th century, which is a further obstacle to researchers seeking documentary evidence of the origins of this group.

According to a “special report” summary by the Census Bureau, “In 1950, for the first time, enumerators were instructed to report persons of mixed white, Negro, and Indian ancestry who live in certain compact communities in the Eastern United States, in terms of the name by which they are locally known. These communities, or ‘racial islands,’ are of long standing and are locally recognized by special names . . . .” (U. S. Bureau of the Census). In Holmes County, Florida, and nowhere else, 60 Dominickers were so enumerated; they were designated as white on the census (Beale, “Estimated”) However, it can be established from earlier census records that known Dominicker families had produced several hundred descendants over the preceding century, though most of them were not living in the so-called Dominicker settlement of Holmes County by the time of the 1950 census.

In 1956, a United States Public Health Service worker, formerly employed by the Census Bureau, who had compiled the data obtained on triracial isolates in the 1950 census, made a brief field trip to the area and interviewed some white residents, but was unable to make contact with any Dominickers, who were 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.” (Beale, “Visit”)

### **Assimilation and Dispersal**

Questions remain as to exactly how individuals and families navigated the process of moving from segregated status to assimilation with the white community. For persons who appeared white and did not remain in the Dominicker settlement, it would seem that in practice, the color line was not always drawn as rigidly as state laws and the documents quoted above would suggest.

One of the unpublished FWP typescripts draws this picture: “The Domineckers live in their little settlement and have few outside interests. . . . 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." The other unpublished typescript says, "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" (FWP, "Dominicker")

Thus, it would seem that by the late 1930's, the group was already beginning to lose its distinct identity as a result of intermarriage with local white families—most of whom were, contrary to the typescript accounts, of ordinary, respectable standing in the community, as can be shown by examination of census records and other documents. It can also be demonstrated that many local descendants of Dominicker families served in the armed forces during World War II, and were listed as white on their service records. This contradiction between the rigid social barriers suggested by the FWP writers and documented cases of more fluid assimilation suggests that color boundaries were more permeable in Holmes County in the first half of the twentieth century than might be imagined today.

### **Late Twentieth Century**

At some point in the late 1960's, in the wake of the famous *Brown vs. Board* Supreme Court decision, the segregated school in Ponce de Leon was closed, and students were integrated into other public schools, at first being sent to school in De Funiak Springs, nearly 20 miles away, instead of to Ponce de Leon. Some descendants of the Dominicker families still live in the area, but with the increased mobility of American society since World War II, many have scattered to other parts of the country. Although some residual racial stigma may still be felt, those remaining in Holmes County and nearby localities have quietly assimilated into the white community over the last half-century, and there is no organized affiliation of Dominicker descendants.

Since there are no longer any Florida laws requiring segregation or defining who is or is not "white," it is an academic question at this point as to who could be considered a Dominicker nowadays, especially since intermarriage between whites and Dominickers over several generations has tended to eliminate obvious differences in appearance. It is not known what has become of any Dominicker families who intermarried with blacks, or whether such descendants maintain any group identity.

Many white families in the area claim descent from the Creek (Muskogee) Indians, a nation with whom the Euchees were once affiliated. The local Choctawhatchee Creeks are organized and said to be seeking state recognition (Mordes).

### **Similar Groups in the Region**

The Dominickers are sometimes given a brief mention in sources discussing Melungeon people, a controversial term which is subject to wide debate; however, there is no known link between the Dominickers and any other mixed-race group, such as the also little-known Cajans (Price 150) of Mobile and Washington counties in Alabama (not to be confused with the much more famous Cajuns of Louisiana) and the Dead Lake People (Nassau 62) of Gulf and Calhoun counties in Florida.

Interestingly, some sources (Hirsch) claim 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, and in a mass meeting shortly after their arrival, supposedly swore one another to secrecy concerning their true origins. The Redbones are well known in southwestern Louisiana, though their origins are still debated. A few links by marriage in that period between members of that group and relatives of the Holmes County Dominickers can be demonstrated from census records, but there is no evidence known to this author to suggest a common origin for the two groups.

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