Preserving the Okmulgee Colored Hospital

By Susan Penn Dragoo[*]

It is an unobtrusive red brick building, two stories and a plain façade, sitting along US Highway 75 near a busy intersection in Okmulgee. Until the recent placement of a granite historical marker, the average person driving past may have failed to notice the structure and, if they did, their curiosity may have been only mildly piqued by the word "Hospital" inscribed in block letters on a limestone panel above the second story.

But the building's modest appearance belies its importance. This was one of a handful of hospitals in Oklahoma established expressly to serve the needs of African Americans during the racial segregation of the first half of the twentieth century, and the only one of those still standing. It represents a scant number of such hospitals that existed across the nation, most of them small. The hospital's construction was funded in part by Black citizens, and it was operated by Black medical

professionals. The Okmulgee Colored Hospital stands today as a symbol of solidarity and determination.

Okmulgeean Leman Lewis Sr. is leading an effort to turn this shell of a building into a monument to the achievements of the past, but he also intends that it bridge the gap that made a separate hospital necessary in the first place. With the nonprofit he formed, Landmark for All Generations, Inc., Lewis is working to preserve the historic building, restore it to usefulness, and honor the accomplishments of Okmulgee's Black community. "We don't have anything for Black people in Okmulgee," said Lewis. "We had a couple of schools and they got torn down, and this is the only thing that's left."[1]

It was 1924 when the Okmulgee Colored Hospital opened, a time of intense racial hostility and strict segregation. Thirty-five miles to the north, the Tulsa Race Massacre had occurred only three years before, part of a nationwide wave of race violence after World War I. On May 31 and June 1, 1921, Tulsa's "Black Wall Street," a thriving and affluent Black commercial district, was destroyed, along with more than one thousand homes and businesses. Perhaps as many as three hundred people died.[2]

Historian John Hope Franklin, whose father lived through the event, wrote:

> For some, what occurred in Tulsa on May 31 and June 1, 1921 was a massacre, a pogrom, or, to use a more modern term, an ethnic cleansing. For others, it was nothing short of a race war. But whatever term is used, one thing is certain: when it was all over, Tulsa's African American district had been turned into a scorched wasteland of vacant lots, crumbling storefronts, burned churches, and blackened, leafless trees.[3]

For African Americans living in Okmulgee, this news reinforced their vulnerability and separate and unequal position in life, according to historian and author Michael Cassity. "To be black in Okmulgee was to be black in a nation where the reminders of racial subjugation were a constant part of daily life," wrote Cassity in a 2007 update to the hospital property's original 1984 listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).[4] With Cassity's permission, his thorough and insightful overview of the Okmulgee Colored Hospital's history and significance are heavily relied upon herein.

After the Civil War and before Oklahoma statehood, conditions in Okmulgee had been less racially segregated. Like the other four of the Five Tribes, when the people of the Muscogee Nation were relo-

cated from Alabama and Georgia to Indian Territory in the 1830s they brought enslaved people with them, numbering about one thousand.[5]

In 1868, after the Civil War and emancipation, the Muscogee established a capital near the Deep Fork River at a location they called Okmulgee, after an important town in their homeland. The two-story capitol building, or council house, of hewn logs was replaced in 1878 with a stone structure that still stands in the heart of downtown Okmulgee.[6]

Within the Muscogee tribe, there was a higher degree of intermarriage with Blacks than within other tribes, thus by the time of tribal enrollment under the Dawes Commission in 1898, formerly enslaved African Americans, or "Creek Freedmen," comprised 33 percent of the Muscogee population. With such a large proportion of Muscogee being of African descent, the community that developed around the Muscogee capitol included many freedmen.[7]

In the Dawes Commission allotments, full-blood Muscogee and freedmen were each given 160 acres. Many full-blood Muscogee chose rural sites, but most freedmen stayed near the original townsite of Okmulgee and were responsible for some of the early physical development of the city.[8] A Black man, James Roper, served as postmaster for the community from 1898 to 1901.[9]

With the opening of Oklahoma Territory for settlement in 1889, many Blacks had immigrated to the territory, but segregation pressures had also increased.[10] In the years following the first land run railroads, allotment, statehood, and the discovery of oil brought dramatic changes. The St. Louis, Oklahoma, and Southern Railway (later the St. Louis and San Francisco Railway) laid track through Okmulgee in 1900, setting off a building boom and an influx of white settlers.[11] By 1907 African Americans still made up 26 percent of Okmulgee's population. Discovery of oil soon brought a surge of people, both Black and white. In 1906 the Muscogee Nation's government was dissolved and its lands distributed individually, with the "surplus" made available to whites. Statehood in 1907 brought Jim Crow laws, codifying racial segregation. Schools, railroad depots, hospitals, cemeteries, restaurants, even public pay telephone booths were segregated by law.[12]

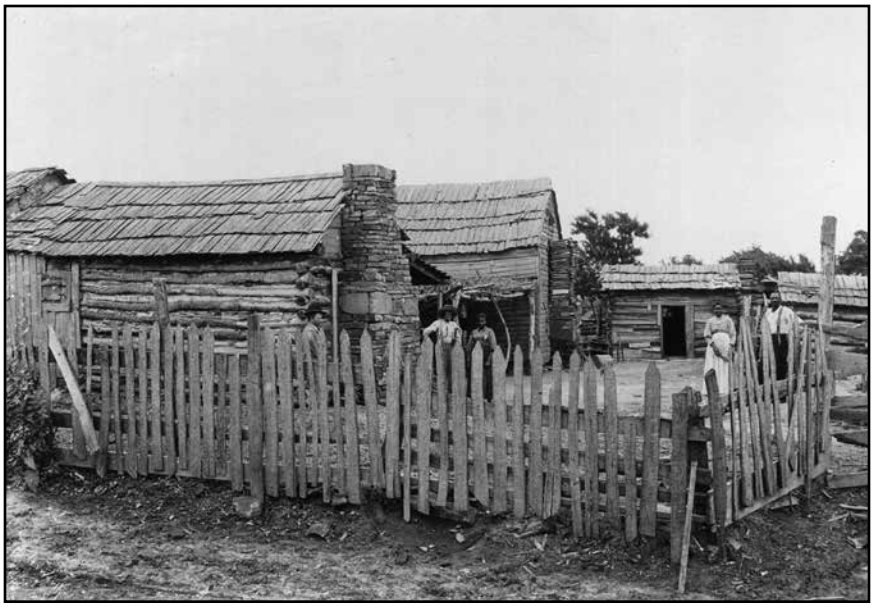
One response to increasing segregation in Oklahoma was the creation of All-Black towns. Between 1865 and 1920 more than fifty such towns and settlements were established by emancipated slaves and other African Americans who relocated to what then appeared to be a place of opportunity. In *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, Larry O'Dell wrote, "Nowhere else, neither in the Deep South nor in the Far West, did so many African American men and women come together to create, occupy, and govern their own communities." [13]

Okmulgee Capitol, 1878, with delegates from thirty-four tribes (2564.0, Robert L. Williams Collection, OHS).

An "All-Black state" was even discussed at one point. All-Black settlements in Oklahoma offered escape from discrimination and abuse, and the benefit of a cohesive and mutually supportive community. But these small, agricultural towns were ruined by the Great Depression, and many residents left Oklahoma to find work. Today, only thirteen historical All-Black towns (and one more modern All-Black town, IXL) survive. Grayson, located about fifteen miles southeast of Okmulgee, is one of those.[14]

After the turn of the twentieth century, particularly before statehood and the adoption of segregation laws, Black residents constructed buildings and operated businesses in the white Okmulgee settlement. But the white community continued to expand, pushing Black businesses to the northeast edge of downtown Okmulgee. Between 1904 and 1929 a separate Black commercial district developed on East Fifth Street, to which Black businesses relocated. By 1911 the Black district was filled with frame buildings, which, between 1913 and 1925, were replaced with brick structures, most built by professionals who officed in the buildings and rented the remaining space to other businesses. By 1920 Okmulgee's population had grown to 17,430; of those, 19 percent were African American, their community separate with distinct business and residential sections, churches, schools, and groceries.[15]

A few Black doctors began coming to Oklahoma Territory as early as 1890. In Guthrie, a Black physician, Dr. Horace W. Conrad, established the first sanitarium for African Americans, but it was short lived. After statehood many Black physicians left the state on the heels of the legislature's enactment of Jim Crow laws. Those who stayed, along



Freedmen at their cabin in Okmulgee, Indian Territory, c. 1898 (15818, Aylesworth Album Collection, OHS).

with Black dentists and pharmacists, organized the Oklahoma Colored Medical, Dental, and Pharmaceutical Association in 1908 to try to improve health services for Blacks. By 1919 there were 120 Black physicians and dentists practicing in Oklahoma, but the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre prompted another out migration.[16]

For an African American physician in Oklahoma, caring for Black patients needing hospitalization posed a significant challenge. Before World War II, Black doctors were not granted hospital privileges in most Oklahoma general hospitals. Most of these hospitals were small, privately owned, and lacked segregated facilities for Blacks. Nonprofit hospitals in larger cities had wards for African American patients but, again, Black referring physicians were not allowed to treat patients in these hospitals.[17]

One of the earliest, largest, and longest-operating Black hospitals in Oklahoma was in Tulsa. Established by the Red Cross after the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, it was originally a fifteen-bed facility at 605 East Pine named Maurice Willows Hospital after a Black Red Cross worker who came to Tulsa to help after the massacre. The property was acquired by the City of Tulsa in 1923 and the facility closed in 1927, then

A ward at Maurice Willows Hospital in Tulsa, c. 1921 (21513.27.B, Mary E. Jones Parrish Collection, OHS).

reopened and operated by the city with between twenty and forty-two beds until 1941. At that time, a nonprofit corporation with a biracial board of trustees leased the property, enlarged it to eighty beds, and operated it until 1967 as the Moton Hospital, named for Dr. R. R. Moton, former president of the Tuskegee Institute. In Oklahoma City, a Black physician, Dr. W. L. Haywood, established the twenty-bed Great Western Hospital at 1824 Northeast Fourth Street in 1939. It closed in 1945. In 1948, the 105-bed Edwards Memorial Hospital, financed by a Black philanthropist, opened at 1624 Northeast Grand Boulevard as an integrated hospital, but primarily served a Black population. The hospital closed in 1960. Boley was the only one of the All-Black towns large enough to support a general hospital. Dr. H. M. Sanders established a hospital there in 1936 and it operated until 1947. Muskogee, also with a sizable Black population, built a thirty-four–bed hospital in 1938 primarily for the patients of Black physicians. The hospital closed in 1958 when other local hospitals were integrated.[18]

Although Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Muskogee, and Boley had Black hospitals, those have either been significantly altered, destroyed, or were constructed at a later date, thus making the Okmulgee Colored Hospital the oldest facility of its type in Oklahoma that remains intact.[19] Its story begins around 1920.

During Okmulgee's oil boom, local merchant William P. Morton had acquired "a considerable amount of farm and city property."[20] In 1920 he sold four lots to the city to be used specifically "for [a] Colored Hospital."[21] There is considerable support for the claim that at least some portion of the money for the purchase came from the Black community. The *Okmulgee Daily Democrat* reported in March of 1922 that the property had been donated by Black residents.[22] Eber A. Oden, serving as head nurse of the Okmulgee Colored Hospital in 1936, stated, "In 1921, the colored citizens of Okmulgee County saw the need of [a Black hospital], and immediately began to put forth efforts to establish it. In 1923, they had secured enough donations from the various federated clubs and leading citizens throughout the community to purchase the property and erect a building. The building was erected at a cost of approximately $25,000.00."[23] Newspaper reports, however, place the construction cost nearer $50,000 and, as noted above, the property was purchased in 1920.[24]

An individual named Buster Hayes is elsewhere credited as the source of the funding for the property, and it is also possible that the city funded the purchase, as the Black hospital appears to have been part of a broader plan of city development financed by the oil boom.[25] The land, however, sat vacant until 1922. A smallpox epidemic in late 1921 may have helped to trigger the start of construction, highlighting, according to Cassity, "the color blindness of smallpox juxtaposed with the color line of health care services."

During the epidemic two detention hospitals, or "pest houses," were built to quarantine smallpox victims, one for white people and one for Black people. Reportedly, ambulances transferred white smallpox patients to the white detention hospital but would not transport Black patients.[26]

"Despite a smaller population," wrote Cassity, "the number of black people afflicted with the disease equaled or exceeded the number of white people who had contracted smallpox; such a disparity in rates of infection could be associated with economics and opportunity and that disparity also prevailed in the nation. Plus, the epidemic pointed up the glaring inequities in treatment for the two races, even in something as fundamental as transporting the afflicted to the detention hospital. It was clear that the dynamics of race relations shaped not only the health needs of the black community but also the inadequate care that those people received."[27]

The movement to build the Black hospital appears to have picked up steam after the epidemic. It may also have been influenced by events in Tulsa, including the race massacre and the subsequent building of a

hospital for Blacks there. In early February 1922, the City of Okmulgee announced the selection of the J. M. Whitehead architectural firm "to make the plans and specifications for the erection of the Negro hospital." This was part of $250,000-worth of municipal projects getting underway at the time, including $150,000 for extensions and improvements to the existing hospital.[28]

Tentative plans for the construction of the hospital called for erection of a two-story brick structure with accommodations for twenty beds and living quarters for a staff of six nurses at an estimated cost of $50,000.[29]

By April 10, 1922, bids were received for the project.[30] All but one bid were above the estimated cost, so the project was rebid in May 1922 and the general contract awarded to Daugherty and Gibson on a bid of $29,485.55, the heating and plumbing contract to Terry Plumbing on a bid of $6,344, the electric wiring contract to the Okmulgee Electric Company on a bid of $1,798.20, and the contract for the installation of a new electric elevator to the Otis Elevator Company on a bid of $3,460, for a total of $41,087.75 in contracts awarded.[31]

The hospital was evidently built and equipped by June 1923, but not opened because of a lack of operating funds, according to Okmulgee Mayor W. C. McAdoo. In January of 1924, representatives of the Black community formed a hospital association and petitioned the board of city commissioners to open the hospital, with a proposal that the city lease the hospital to them for $1 and appropriate $1,000 for its operation for the next six months.[32]

Once City Attorney L. L. Cowley determined the city had the authority to lease the institution, the Black hospital association indicated they would operate the hospital and furnish any additional operating funds.[33] "We will find some way to provide the money needed to open and operate the negro hospital at once," said City Commissioner R. E. Jenness.[34] The city agreed to appropriate $1,000 for operating expenses and the additional amount required would be raised by "popular subscription among the negroes."[35]

The hospital was turned over to the hospital association on February 2, and on February 22 officially opened to the public with a dedication ceremony attended by hundreds.[36] Multiple speakers addressed topics such as "The Need of the Hospital and the Need of the Co-operation of the Citizens of Okmulgee to Make it a Success" (Bertha Hollingsworth); and "How to Conduct and Manage the Hospital to Make it Beneficial to the Whole Community" (Drs. C. A. Matoon and W. C. Mitchener). Black attorney A. L. J. Meriweather, one of the speakers, said, "This hospital is for the use of the colored people and they should take advantage of it."[37]

Although the hospital was not a charitable institution, arrangements were made by the board to care for those financially unable to pay, and it was reported that Black physicians had donated $300 worth of surgical instruments and supplies.[38]

Cassity wrote that the African Americans who negotiated the agreement had reason for satisfaction:

> They had, after all, developed a structure that would place operational decisions in their own hands, they had created a hospital in which African American physicians and nurses would practice medicine, and they had inaugurated a hospital where the black population of Okmulgee and the area around it would find not just admission but treatment with dignity and respect, something lacking at many hospitals where they were assigned inferior quarters and given condescending treatment at the hands of white professionals. As for the control of the hospital exercised by the city, the minutes of the actions and discussions of the city commissioners in 1924 and for several years afterwards, when the pattern of administrative control became firmly established, do not mention the Okmulgee Colored Hospital even once nor was it ever included in the city budgets presented although the same minutes contain frequent references to the "white hospital."

The two-story brick building had electric lighting, steam heat, and indoor plumbing.[39] Architect Michael Kertok, who inspected the structure in 2005 and 2006 in order to develop a set of recommendations for the rehabilitation of the building that were issued in 2006, described it as "a fine example of fire-proof construction typical of hospital buildings of the 1920s."[40]

A main public entrance was situated on the east side of the building and a service entrance on the west side. An entrance on the north was probably used by attending physicians. A concrete drive wrapped around the west and south sides, facilitating access for ambulances, hearses, and delivery trucks. On the first floor were boarding rooms for nurses, with adjacent rooms likely used for administrative functions. The southwest corner housed the boiler room and an incinerator. The kitchen, staff dining room, and laundry were located in the northwest quadrant, and a dumbwaiter facilitated delivery of food and linens to the second floor.[41]

Connecting the two floors were an elevator and single open staircase. "The traction elevator was of automatic operation, a rather new

innovation at the time," wrote Kertok. "In keeping with the fire-proof construction, the stair is constructed entirely of iron."[42]

Patient care areas were located on the second floor, with a large, ten-bed ward occupying the south side. Four to six beds were housed in a smaller ward on the west side, with an adjacent nurse's station. A semiprivate room shared a bathroom with the south ward. The operating room was located in the northwest corner, with large north windows admitting light. Adjacent rooms provided facilities for sterilization, preparation, and other functions associated with surgery. In the northeast corner, two rooms were probably used as a delivery room and maternity ward. Along the east side of the second floor was an open-air porch for patients.[43]

Among the new hospital's board of trustees were former postmaster James Roper and four members from the All-Black neighboring town of Grayson, including W. E. Debbs, Preston Dillingham, Paul Arbe, and Robert Thierry.[44] Reverend J. D. Gibson, who was a teacher as well as minister, chaired the board. Comprising the remainder were two individuals employed at local grocers, W. H. Russell and Emile Jackson, and two people from outside Okmulgee County, M. A. Wade of Boynton and W. H. Twine of Muskogee.[45]

Dr. H. Kyle served as the superintendent of the hospital at the time of its opening, assisted by Dr. A. L. Wallace. These two physicians operated the hospital until 1931, when they resigned to practice in Oakland, California. The hospital's first nurse was Beulah Reah Roper, the daughter of board member and former postmaster James Roper and a graduate of the Wheatly Provident Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri.[46] Official documents from the operation of the hospital have not survived, thus little information is thus available about the hospital's operation over the years.[47]

Some insight is offered by an interview in 1936 with Eber A. Oden, a graduate of both the Park Sanitarium in Guthrie and the Wheatly Provident Hospital, who was head nurse of the Okmulgee Colored Hospital and was interviewed for the Works Progress Administration Federal Writers' Project. At the time of Oden's interview, Dr. J. H. Burt was superintendent of the hospital (1931–41), with Drs. Stanley L. Daigle, J. M. White and E. James Guess as staff members. Also on the nursing staff was F. E. Wellington, a graduate of Saint Agnes Hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina.[48]

Oden reported that the hospital was operating a clinic once a month for treatment of the babies of the community, paid for by the city's "federated clubs," and that plans for a nurse training program were under-

Hospital trustee Preston Dillingham, seated at left (photograph provided to the author by Leman Lewis Sr.).

way. The hospital's capacity was twenty-five patients at the time and, according to Oden, it rated second in size of Black hospitals throughout the state of Oklahoma.[49] The Okmulgee Colored Hospital hosted the annual conference of the Oklahoma Colored Medical, Dental, and Pharmaceutical Association in Okmulgee multiple times, the last in 1951.[50]

As a validation of the quality of its care, the Okmulgee Colored Hospital achieved accreditation by the American Medical Association. But, over time, such recognition became harder to achieve as hospital size became a major consideration. Professional organizations established capacity minimums as high as 100 beds to qualify for accreditation when an estimated 93 percent of black hospitals had fewer than 50 beds. Small hospitals thus struggled to keep up and grow. A few large Black hospitals managed to keep pace with the more demanding accreditation standards, but most could not.[51]

The number of African American hospitals had already been in decline since around the time the Okmulgee Colored Hospital opened. In 1923 there may have been as many as two hundred such hospitals in the United States, but by the end of the 1920s the number had dropped to around 164, and by 1944 to 121.[52]

After World War II, segregation began to crumble and focus shifted to gaining access to white hospitals for Black physicians, nurses, and patients. "Laudable though it was, this weakened the support for the separate Black hospitals and made their future growth and even existence that much more challenging," wrote Cassity. And, with the 1946 passage of the Hill-Burton Act by the US Congress, widespread con-

A nurse at the Okmulgee Colored Hospital (photograph provided to the author by Julie Roberds).

struction of new, modern hospital facilities made it more difficult for older, small hospitals to compete.[53]

Thus, while the facts around the demise of the Okmulgee Colored Hospital are unavailable, the same forces impacting Black hospitals at a national level likely had an impact in Okmulgee, making the continued existence of a Black hospital difficult to justify. On July 29, 1956, the *Okmulgee Daily Times* reported that the previous day the integration of African American and white patients in the Okmulgee city hospital was brought about by the city hospital board, which halted operation of the Black hospital. "Operation of the colored hospital will not be stopped immediately due to the extreme illness of some patients now confined there. Some patients have been transferred to the City hospital and after the present patients of the colored institution are discharged it will be closed." It was also noted that admission of African Americans to the white hospital was not new and that, for several years prior to opening the Black hospital, African American patients "were received and treated at the institution." The city cited "uneconomical operation of the colored hospital" as its reason for taking the action and said most of the personnel of the Black hospital would transfer to duty at the city hospital, although some would likely be laid off. The city also maintained that African Americans would be treated as any other patient or visitor at the city hospital. "There will be no special entrances, visiting rooms or wards to accommodate the Negro . . . when they enter the hospital, they will have equal privileges."[54]

That may have been true, although some believed otherwise. In *Hospitals in Oklahoma, A History, 1924–1990*, Cleveland Rodgers wrote

that when the Okmulgee Colored Hospital closed, "the city hospital opened a ward for black patients in the basement of the municipal white hospital." Exactly what happened is undetermined.[55]

On a cold day in December 2019 I sat with officials of Landmark for All Generations, Inc., in an office that once served as a nurse's boarding room in the Okmulgee Colored Hospital. We talked as we huddled near an anemic heater trying to keep warm in the shell of a building, now stripped of partitions and other trappings of its use by community organizations since the hospital closed. On the east side of the structure, windows that had been boarded up now admitted sunlight, and the sun porch, once closed in with cinder blocks, was open and fulfilling its original purpose.

Before we sat down to talk, I toured the building, visiting the boiler room and incinerator, elevator, operating room, kitchen, and nurse's rooms, then climbed the iron staircase to inspect the patient wards. Devoid of any modern trappings, it stood ready to connect with its past in a new undertaking.

Building owner Leman Lewis Sr. formed the nonprofit Landmark for All Generations, Inc., in 2017 to foster restoration of the building and creation of a museum and cultural center. "Our vision," he said, "is to be inclusive, for everybody, not like it used to be because everything was separated. We've been able to accomplish some of that even without the museum, because we came together as a group. Some of the largest supporters are white people. We haven't completed the project but we've bridged the gap."[56]

Lewis is a retired automotive technician and service manager. It was April of 2015 when he bought the building, almost by accident, it seems:

> I used to live over here on 915 East Third Street [across the street to the north of the hospital building]. Of course the water was rusty in Okmulgee. I moved to 1512 East Seventh Street, and the water was just as bad. So I went to City Hall with a bottle of water to complain about my water being rusty and I stopped in to see the city manager, Roger Ballenger [now deceased], a friend of mine. He told me, "What you need to do, you need to buy the hospital." And I kind of laughed and said, "How much?" He said, "Make an offer." So I just threw a figure out. And he said, "Okay, I'll let you know something in a couple of days." Of course, you don't think anything about something like that. So they [the city council] had a meeting and he called me and told me that I had bought myself the hospital.[57]

Aerial photograph of downtown Okmulgee, 1934 (2012.201.OVZ001.0334, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

Thus, by happenstance, Lewis came into possession of the historic building. In the years since the hospital closed, the City of Okmulgee still owned the building, leasing it for use as a nursing home and as offices for community organizations, including the Deep Fork Community Action Center, Okmulgee County Youth Shelter, and the local chapter of the American Red Cross. It sat empty after its last tenant vacated, and was condemned by the City of Okmulgee in the 1990s.[58]

The property was first listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1984. A 2007 update to the NRHP listing prepared by Michael Cassity notes that the 1984 listing was for the "Okmulgee Black Hospital" at a level of local significance. "Additional research and consideration within a national context indicate that the Okmulgee Colored Hospital was significant at the national level as well," wrote Cassity. "This amendment to the National Register listing justifies that national significance. Because of its distinctive design and construction the building is also eligible for the National Register of Historic Places . . . in the area of significance Architecture, at the local level. A further review of contemporary sources also justifies the change of the name from Okmulgee Black Hospital to Okmulgee Colored Hospital. This is how the hospital was referred to during its use and how it is noted in official documents related to its creation and operation."[59]

In 1998 the Okmulgee County Multi-Cultural Heritage Association (OCMHA) was formed by a group of local citizens to rehabilitate the Okmulgee Colored Hospital and turn it into a "dynamic, first-class historical cultural center."[60] The organization obtained grants for an architectural assessment and plan, funded emergency repairs to the roof and falling chimney, and helped the City of Okmulgee fund remediation and restoration, including removal of the cinder blocks from the sun porch and restoration of the east windows.[61]

In 2013 the OCMHA asked the Okmulgee City Council to fully fund the restoration in the amount of $1.2 million with monies from the

Okmulgee Colored Hospital, 2020. The photograph shows the historical marker in the lower right (photograph provided to the author by Julie Roberds).

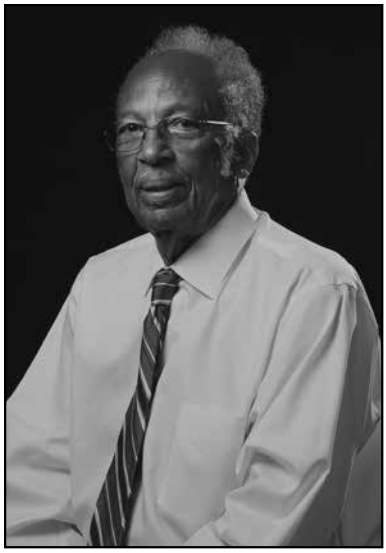
city's sale of the Creek Council House back to the Muscogee Nation, but the request was denied.[62] In 2014 the city declared the building to be surplus.[63]

According to Lewis, after the building was declared surplus and put up for bid, the OCMHA bid on the building and their offer was accepted, but the sale fell through. "So I wound up purchasing it for $7,500," he said.

After his purchase, because of the property's listing on the NRHP, Lewis consulted with the Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office and the National Park Service about restoring the building, gaining approval to move forward in early 2016.[64]

According to Lewis, the first thing the building needed was repair or replacement of the roof, a project estimated at $20,000. As it turned out, the cost was $50,000 for a new roof, an expense donated by local business Covington Aircraft.[65]

The building's location on US Highway 75 (320 North Wood Drive) may prove fortuitous. When the hospital was built, this expressway between Okmulgee and Tulsa, dubbed the "Okmulgee Beeline," did not exist. Highway 75 entered the city about a mile west and wound through what is now the center of town. It was 1959 when the beeline was opened and the US-75 name moved a mile east. This building's life as a hospital had ended three years before. But its location on the



Leman Lewis Sr. (photograph provided to the author by Leman Lewis Sr.).

highway may increase its attractiveness for investors and, ultimately, for visitors to the proposed museum and cultural center.

On June 27, 2020, another dedication ceremony took place on the grounds of the Okmulgee Colored Hospital, this one for a historical marker funded by a grant from the Oklahoma Heritage Preservation Grant Program of the Oklahoma Historical Society. It was a big step toward Lewis's and Landmark for All Generations's mission to "work in partnership with the Okmulgee community, the state of Oklahoma and nationally to preserve artifacts and history of the former Okmulgee Colored Hospital building."[66]

In July 2020 the building was listed as one of Preservation Oklahoma's 2020 Most Endangered Places, a recognition helping to create awareness of what Oklahomans can do to advocate for the selected historical landmarks.

The text of the historical marker reads:

> The Okmulgee Colored Hospital, built in 1922–1923 and opened in 1924, operated as a racially segregated and separate hospital until it closed in 1956. With 18 to 25 beds, located in a community of less than 20,000 people when it opened, the Okmulgee Colored Hospital is significant for what it reveals about race relations and African American history. Underserved in all parts of life and discriminated against and excluded from access to opportunities in education, employment, residence, recreation, and the

system of justice, African Americans encountered also a health care system that was particularly egregious in its inequities. The lack of access to hospital care—for both health professionals and patients—impacted African Americans severely, and the emergence of hospitals operated by and for Black people, within a nation where segregation was legally sanctioned and enforced, both alleviated physical suffering and demonstrated the resolve and cooperative spirit of the Black community in addressing vital problems. There were never many of these hospitals, and the few that have been recognized and preserved have been the largest and the least typical. Most were small, less than 50 beds, and themselves were vulnerable to pressures of racial discrimination in funding and support and to increasing pressures of accreditation and expansion. By the 1950s, moreover, the Civil Rights Movement in the nation called for integrated institutions, not racially separate hospitals, and since then the Black hospitals of the nation have all but disappeared.

Endnotes

[*] A native of Okmulgee and a resident of Norman, Susan Penn Dragoo is a freelance writer and photographer with a focus on historical travel in the American Southwest and Oklahoma in particular. Her work, often published in *Oklahoma Today*, includes retracing the travels of Thomas Nuttall in Oklahoma, following the path of Captain Randolph B. Marcy's 1849 California Road, and identifying what remains of the Indian Territory segment of the Butterfield Overland Mail stagecoach route. She and her husband, Bill, also travel extensively via four-wheel drive vehicle and motorcycle, as well as hiking, and they document their adventures for popular magazines such as *Overland Journal*, *OutdoorX4*, *ADVMoto*, *TrailGroove*, and *RoadRunner*. Dragoo also does scenic photography for the Oklahoma State Parks and her images hang in a growing number of state park lodges and cabins, including Sequoyah State Park and Lake Murray. Dragoo holds a bachelor's degree in telecommunications from the University of Tulsa, a master's degree in management from Southern Nazarene University, and a master's in biostatistics from the University of Oklahoma. She extends her gratitude to Dr. Michael Cassity for allowing his work in the 2007 update to the Okmulgee Colored Hospital's National Register of Historic Places listing to be so heavily used herein and highly recommend the document to readers for a deeper understanding of this topic and the topic of Black hospitals in general. The document is available at nr2_shpo.okstate.edu/pdfs/84003387.pdf, and Dr. Cassity's website is www.michaelcassity.org. At the time of this writing, the leadership of Landmark's for All Generations, Inc., is actively pursuing an agenda to raise funds and bring new life to the facility. The photograph on page 54 of the Okmulgee Colored Hospital in 2020 was provided to the author by Julie Roberds.

[1] Leman Lewis Sr., interview by the author, December 11, 2019. Contemporaneous sources referred to the building as the Okmulgee Colored Hospital, which is the terminology used in this article.

[2] Scott Ellsworth, "Tulsa Race Massacre," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=TU013.

[3] John Hope Franklin, "Tulsa Still Hasn't Faced the Truth About the Race Riot of 1921," *History News Network,* hnn.us/articles/38175.html; *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot, 2001).

[4] Michael Cassity, National Register of Historic Places application (additional documentation), Okmulgee Colored Hospital, Okmulgee, OK, NRIS no. 84003387, June 1, 2007, nr2_shpo.okstate.edu/pdfs/84003387.pdf (hereafter cited as OCH NRHP additional documentation).

[5] Terri Myers, "From Creek Freedmen to Oklahoma Oilmen: Okmulgee's Black Heritage and Architectural Legacy (1878–1929)," prepared for the Okmulgee Historic Preservation Committee, Okmulgee, OK, December 1991, 29–39, www.okhistory.org/shpo/docs/OkmulgeeLegacy.pdf.

[6] Maxine Bamburg, "Okmulgee," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=OK092.

[7] Myers, "From Creek Freedmen to Oklahoma Oilmen," 29–61.

[8] Danney Goble and Terry Myers, "Design Guidelines for Okmulgee Downtown Historic District," September 1992, 8, www.okmulgeeonline.com/DocumentCenter/View/49/Historic-Preservation-District-Design-Guidelines-PDF?bidId=; Myers, "From Creek Freedmen to Oklahoma Oilmen," 37

[9] Myers, "From Creek Freedmen to Oklahoma Oilmen," 40

[10] Larry O'Dell, "All-Black Towns," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=AL009.

[11] Bamburg, "Okmulgee."

[12] Myers, "From Creek Freedmen to Oklahoma Oilmen," 41–46.

[13] O'Dell, "All-Black Towns."
[14] Ibid.
[15] Myers, "From Creek Freedmen to Oklahoma Oilmen," 20–21, 30.
[16] Cleveland Rodgers, *Hospitals in Oklahoma: A History, 1824–1990* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1991), 46–48.
[17] Ibid., 48.
[18] Ibid., 48–49.
[19] Bryan Brown, National Register for Historic Places application, Okmulgee Colored Hospital, Okmulgee, OK, NRIS no. 84003387, June 22, 1984, Section 8, "Significance," npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/4aecc9e6-0758-4a89-944b-1beb7a77d24f. This is the original application for inclusion in the NRHP that was approved in 1984.
[20] "William Morton Dies; Rites Set," *Okmulgee (OK) Daily Times*, September 16, 1956, 1.
[21] OCH NRHP additional documentation, 15.
[22] "Hospital Addition and Negro Hospital Plans Are Approved," *Okmulgee (OK) Daily Democrat*, March 5, 1922, 1.
[23] E. A. Oden, "Works Progress Administration Writers' Project interview with Miss E. A. Oden, head nurse at the Okmulgee (Colored) City Hospital," April 3, 1936, "Okmulgee" vertical file, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center, Oklahoma History Center, Oklahoma City, OK.
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[26] OCH NRHP additional documentation, 17.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
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[33] "Defer Action on Negro Hospital," *Okmulgee Daily Democrat,* January 9, 1924, 8.
[34] "Negro Hospital May Be Leased," *Okmulgee Daily Democrat,* January 14, 1924, 8.
[35] "Negroes To Operate Their Own Hospital," *Okmulgee Daily Times*, January 15, 1924, 2.
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[38] Ibid.; "Negro Hospital Will Be Opened," *Okmulgee Daily Democrat,* February 21, 1924, 4B.
[39] Kertok, "Inspection Report and Plan," 20.
[40] Ibid., 7.
[41] Ibid., 9.
[42] Ibid., 8.
[43] Ibid., 9.
[44] OCH NRHP additional documentation, 21–22.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Oden interview; OCH NRHP additional documentation, 22.

[47] Lewis interview.
[48] Oden interview.
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[53] Ibid., 28–31. The Hill-Burton Act, passed by the US Congress in 1946, provided funds to hospitals, nursing homes, and other health facilities in the form of grants and loans for modernization and construction. Fund recipients agreed to provide a "reasonable volume of services" to those unable to pay. United States Health Resources and Services Administration, "Hill-Burton Free and Reduced-Cost Health Care," www.hrsa.gov/get-health-care/affordable/hill-burton/index.html, accessed July 21, 2021.
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