

Testimony of Bertha Gaffney Gorman
September 24, 2021
Sacramento, California

Members of the Reparation Task Force, Good afternoon.

My name is Bertha Gaffney Gorman.

I am honored to have the opportunity to tell my family's story to this task force. I hope our story will further your understanding of the legacy of harm caused to my ancestors and their descendants as a result of their enslavement in South Carolina, and especially in the state of Texas.

Personal History

My paternal family's enslavement can be traced to the early 1800s in Charleston, South Carolina. My paternal ancestors were enslaved by white Irish immigrants whose family came to New York in 1797. Records show that Peter and Martha Gaffney left New York in 1827 when slavery was officially ended and moved to Charleston South Carolina where slavery was in full force.

Peter and Martha were already rich, having made their fortune in mercantile. In South Carolina, they expanded their ownership of humans, and profited from the labor of the enslaved people who worked their farms; they rented out and sold human stock.

When the Gaffney's decided to relocate, just prior to the beginning of the Civil War, they sold off many of the people they enslaved in preparation for their migration to East Texas. The plan, as I understand it, was that Martha would go ahead by train with furnishings and 20-plus slaves to set up the household and businesses. Peter would stay behind to settle their affairs, which included selling off property the remaining slaves.

Among the slaves taken to Texas by Martha Gaffney were my paternal great-great grandparents Samuel and Sophia, who later took the surname Gaffney. According to my dad, one of Samuel's brothers was sold downriver during the transition but later found his way to Texas and his family.

However, Peter Gaffney was killed in a duel before leaving South Carolina, and Martha Gaffney settled in Texas alone.

Martha settled in a rural area outside Clarksville, a small town in East Texas whose most noted attractions was and still is the hanging tree that stands in the middle of the town square. This is the area where I was born in 1940.

My Paternal great grandparents were born into slavery. Their son, my paternal grandfather, was born in Texas during the de facto slavery that followed the 1865 emancipation Proclamation. My father,

born just 47 years after slavery ended in Texas, and all of his family suffered the degradation of enslavement all of their lives, as did his **children**.

The Emancipation Proclamation and General Order #3 delivered to slaveholders and enslaved people of Texas on June 19, 1865, were precognitive of what was to come:

In the **Proclamation, President Lincoln said to the people declared to be free ...**

“... I recommend to them that, in all cases **when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.**

General Order Number 3 stated:

“... all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes **that between employer and hired laborer.**”

What did this mean for my family?

Seldom having left the area where they were born, and lived and worked all of their lives, these freed people knew little of opportunities outside their community. So, they continued to work for their enslavers; to live in the same shacks; and to experience the same cruelties and control.

The promise of 40 acres was for most people, unfulfilled. The mule was never a part of the deal. My family was given small plots of land, not 40 acres as were other families in the six villages where formerly enslaved lived outside Clarksville. These communities still exist, inhabited by the descendants of the enslaved there, including members of my own family. In many cases, the land that was given was taken back or lost through various ploys.

According to my dad, my great grandfather believed that the U.S. government was complicit in continuing slavery in Texas. There were trains, teletypes, and certainly mail that could have carried the messages. As to the argument that the soldiers were needed to keep the peace, my grandpa said the enslaved in Texas were told they had to ‘stay in place. When “freed” people walked away, he said, they were brought back as vagrants.

So, even though my ancestors were ‘free’ on paper, they were not in reality.

Like many enslaved people, my great-great grandparents took the name of their former owners at emancipation. Gaffney was and still is a respected name in Texas and in South Carolina which has a town named for the white Gaffney family. In Texas, however, they continued to work the land under the ultimate control of their former owners.

As a child, I remember whispered stories of beatings, castrations, and hangings. I remember my father and other males being hidden in the storm cellar because the Klan was riding; I know of and have relatives born of rapes or relationships with white men. One of the richest landowners in our family was the heir to his white father’s land.

I remember my mom's story about the poor white woman who chose to have a "horse doctor" birth her child rather than the Black midwife who had delivered all of my mother's children, including me. The woman bled to death.

My father only went to the third grade, but he had amazing natural abilities in mechanics, farming and animal husbandry. In 1948, he was moved by the Ablowich family, for whom he had worked for many years, to Commerce to run the Ablowich Farm/Ranch 70 miles east of Clarksville. His boss hired him out to teach classes in Animal Husbandry at the agriculture college, now Texas A&M, Commerce, where he was paid as a field hand.

Evidence of Racism and Discrimination.

a. In my mind, Texas was hateful and cruel. The hanging tree was a constant reminder for Black people who stepped out of place. I know from my parents that an uncle was castrated for allegedly having sex with a white woman. My brother was beaten for staying on the sidewalk when a white woman passed. He was 16 years old.

b. Education.

Because the land we lived on was considered 'private', the government provided no services like schools for children, health care or cemeteries for our dead, or roads. Former slaves built the one-room school that my parents attended and paid the salary and room and board for a teacher. When the families were unable to pay a teacher, there was no school. I did not attend school regularly until I was almost nine. My mother taught me to read and my timetables.

The school still stands as the community church. The families, including mine, donate annually to care for the cemetery and the graves of our ancestors.

I was born and lived in the segregated south until I was 16. I attended school regularly for the first time when my family moved to Commerce, Texas. I was almost 9 years old. In Commerce, I attended Norris High, a segregated Black school with no electricity, running water or indoor plumbing until 1953 when a new school was built. But the teachers were caring and committed to the education of black kids.

c. Lack of Resources

1. Poor roads in rural areas.

To this day the county provides paved roads in Clarksville and up to the communities where the African Americans live. Inside the communities, the roads were dirt until families tarred the paths to ancestral homes, but there are no paved roads within the community. During the freezing that occurred in early 2021, many of my family members were without running water, heat, or electricity for months while whites outside the community were taken care of within weeks. It was a horribly bad time.

d. Economics

1. My father was unable to sustain the family above poverty because of the economic negativity bred by the post slave culture. Although my grandparents and parents were hard workers and landowners who grew and raised their own food, the system required them to buy on credit food staples, seeds, farming equipment, clothing and tools from the company store' owned by whites. The debts were due when the crops were harvested, after which there was very little money left and the process of borrowing began again. This form of economics negatively impacted our education as well. As children, we were critical to the harvesting and were unable to attend, if there was teacher, until after the crops were gathered, sometimes as late as November.
2. My father was frustrated at his state and became alcoholic. He was often hired out to do things at much higher rate of pay for which he was paid as field hand.

e. Racism/Hate Crimes/Threats of Harm

1. The Hanging a living symbol of racism and hatred in Clarksville. This tree was there when I was a child, and there when I visited in 2018.

As a child I was told by my parents of Black men and women beaten and hanged for vagrancy; Black men accused of looking at white women, or homeless blacks beaten for stealing food. The tree was a constant reminder of what could be done to a black person who talked back or stepped out of line. The tree is still there. So is the hatred.

2. Hate Crimes/Threats of Harm

- (a) We lived three miles outside the town of Commerce and often walked to and from school. White kids would follow us in their trucks, hurling insults and rocks. To avoid them, we would walk through the wooded areas rather than along the road where we had better chances of catching a ride. Once my sister stepped into an abandoned well and almost drowned. We kids managed to pull her out.
- (b) My brother was beaten by the cops because he did not move off the sidewalk for a white woman. This incident steeled my father's determination to leave Texas
- (c) A well-known incident, often recited by my father, was the murder of a black man by a white man who ran the black man down in a car because he "dared" to cross the road in front of him. The white man was arrested and brought before a judge released him with no charges because the white man said he thought the black man was a dog.

My father, frustrated and anxious, began to drink. He knew he needed to leave Texas if his children were surviving or have a chance at any kind of education. A relative of the Ablowich family who had moved to New Mexico, convinced my father to move there and work for him.

We moved to New Mexico in 1956. We had no relatives in New Mexico and there were barely 100 Black people in the town, but our opportunities were better. I was able to attend a well-equipped integrated school with First Nation, White, Mexican and a few Black kids. It did not take long for me to

catch up academically. I was an honor student throughout high school. Ours was still a rural working farm life, but my father was paid better, and our living standards were hugely improved. We were 'ok'.

The drawback: all of the teachers were white and racism among them was prevalent. I wrote a story for English and the white male teacher gave me an "F", called me a liar in front of the class and accused me of plagiarism, though he never explained what I was supposed to have plagiarized. My brother punched the teacher and was kicked out of the school. Had we been in Texas, my brother would have been killed or severely beaten by whites for hitting a white man. My parents carried the Texas fear. My brother left New Mexico and for New York. He was 18. I was 17.

Although I was an honor student through high school, the teachers in New Mexico never spoke to me about scholarships or college.

In my senior high school year, an aunt, who lived in Sacramento, came to visit, and informed my parents that I could attend Sacramento City College free. That was my chance to attend college.

Discrimination in Travel

I traveled interstate on the Greyhound bus twice in my life. Once to visit an uncle in Denver and the second time to move to California.

My uncle invited me to come for the summer to babysit his young son. I travelled alone to Denver from Commerce. I had to sit in the back of the bus; I could not sit or eat inside the bus station and had to get food through a window in the back and eat outside. There were Colored Only and White Only, as well No N---- Signs posted, and the toilet was an outside away from the bus station.

Discrimination California Style

After graduating high school in New Mexico in June 1959, I worked in the local cleaners for the summer to earn money for the bus trip to Sacramento. City College was affordable. I only had to pay for books and about \$3 per unit.

Jobs were a different issue: My first job was as babysitting for a young white woman who lived a few blocks from City College and worked for the State. I had worked for her for less than month when she told me the State was testing for clerks and suggested that I take the test. When I returned to work on Monday, she informed me that she had hired someone else, because she was sure that I would pass the test and be hired, leaving her without childcare. I understood.

It was 1959 and I was not allowed to take the state test. I was given every imaginable excuse: they weren't giving the test; they had already given the test; they would call me. The bottom line is that I was not allowed to test for a clerk position.

No test and no job. I continued at City College, did odd jobs, including working as a maid for a wealthy white family while attending night classes at the Sacramento Business School that promised a certificate as a Comptometer Operator and a job in six months. I completed the course and was

immediately hired by Pacific Bell, my first office job with a racist and sexist environment in which women had to ask to go the bathroom and the woman supervisor would write one up if she returned with her hair combed differently.

I got a temporary job with the State calculating State Employees contributions to the Social Security system. My supervisor, also a musician, wanted to travel with her husband. She believed I was the best person to replace her as temporary supervisor and wrote a letter to that effect. The director told her in front of me that he could not hire me as a supervisor – I was too young; not enough experience; had not taken the exam and no one would accept me as their supervisor. She argued that I was the most qualified in the pool. The director relented and said I could stay on as supervisor until he found someone else. I said no thanks.

Within two weeks I had tested and was the first Black person hired by Wonder Bakery. The union job paid well but the atmosphere was toxic: I was on my way to work when I heard on the radio that John F. Kennedy has been shot. I was devastated. When I walked into the office, my white supervisor asked, “Did you hear that that nigger lover was killed, and he was shot by a nigger.” And she laughed. She later was killed in an automobile accident on her way to work.

Later, I was given her position which drew the outrage of a white male colleague. After ranting that he deserved the position because I was an unqualified affirmative action hire, he retorted with “you got the job but I’m still free, white and 21.”

My life changed with the EOP program at then-Sacramento State College. At the urging of a friend, I quit my good job at Wonder Bakery and enrolled in Journalism at Sac State. I received an internship with the Sacramento Bee and worked and attended Sac State fulltime. In 1970, I moved to Sweden to study International Affairs at the University of Uppsala.

While in Sweden, I used every opportunity to travel with my sons; overstayed my grant and supported us writing travel articles for the Bee, other newspapers, and magazines, including a South African magazine., about our travels to Europe, Russia, Africa, Scandinavia, Portugal, etc. When I returned to the states in 1972, I was hired as the first fulltime African American Woman staff writer.

Housing Discrimination.

I lived most of my life from 1959 to 1985 in Oak Park, a predominantly black community with a thriving business center until the late 60s. Until the passage of the Rumford Fair Housing Act in 1963, housing discrimination was the norm and legal throughout California. White landlords would not rent apartments to "colored people", and restrictive covenants enabled white property owners to refuse to sell to people of color. As a result, black people resided where they were allowed to.

I left Sacramento in 1985 to take a position with Lockheed Martin Corporation. My family did not leave Oak Park until the 1990s when the neighborhood had become depleted. Oak Park is now a gentrified community and the 33rd Street house where I raised my sons is unaffordable to Black people who still live in the area.

Housing and educational discrimination took other negative forms as well. My husband and I purchased our first home in Freeport Manor, once a landing place for black professionals affected by the housing covenants. In addition to the huge backyard, the house was attractive to me because of the elementary school a few blocks away. However, during the busing to fix the problem era, that school was to be closed and my children were to be bussed miles away to an unfamiliar community where they would be unable to participate in sports and other school activities. I joined other parents in protesting the closure. We lost. I moved to a community where my kids could walk to school and home.

How do we solve a 400-year-old problem? In my mind, the solution lies in economic and education equality, and grants to ensure it, regardless of income or status; housing and business ownership, health care, and childcare.

When I arrived in Sweden 50 years ago, I received with my housing allowance a healthcare card for me and my children. Like Swedes and immigrants, I received a monthly allowance to ensure that my children had the things they needed, and there was a free childcare facility in the apartment where I lived.