

'Racial cleansing' of Forsyth's blacks examined: 02/20/08

By [RODNEY HO](#) The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

There were 1,098 blacks living in Forsyth County in 1912. Within a few months, that figure dropped to 30. What happened?

"It's the largest racial cleansing in America that I know of," said Elliot Jaspin, a Cox Newspapers reporter who wrote a book on the subject, "Buried in the Bitter Waters."

A PBS Independent Lens documentary, "Banished," based on that book and which will debut on Georgia Public Broadcasting Thursday night, looks at how black residents were driven out of Forsyth County and two cities — Harrison, Ark., and Pierce City, Mo. — and its ramifications decades later.

"I wanted to explore the past's impact on the present," said director Marco Williams. According to records at the time, an alleged rape of a white woman in Forsyth led to a black man being lynched and whites forcing blacks out of town.

In Forsyth County, Williams said, many white people today believe that black landowners who fled were paid for their land. But he said there was little if any paper trail proving this to be true. Rather, it appears whites simply took the land through adverse possession. This means they moved onto the land for free and kept it long enough so it became legally theirs. Williams addresses the issue of reparations and who would be responsible now to pay it. He admits there are no easy answers.

Descendants of former Forsyth black families, including the Strickland family featured in the documentary, have attempted to get some form of reparations to no avail.

"One thing is certain: how valuable the property is today," Williams said in the documentary.

James McCoy, president of the Cumming-Forsyth County Chamber of Commerce, said he hasn't seen the documentary yet. "It's a documentary about a time in our community that is thankfully no longer a contemporary reality," McCoy said.

Donna Parrish has lived in Forsyth since 1970, was a charter member of the historical society there and has written books on Forsyth history.

"I always heard the story where they ran everybody out," she said. Her research of the era, she says, indicates some black residents sold their property, sometimes to other black residents, and that others returned.

"It doesn't make a sensational story if you tell it the way it happened," she said.

She still recalls the barrage of news crews after Hosea L. Williams' march in 1987. Today, she says Forsyth is a friendly and tolerant place, and she has both black and white neighbors.

"Regardless of what happened, it was 1912," she said. "I'm not saying it wasn't bad. Any time you have a mob, it's bad."

For decades, Forsyth remained a virtually all-white rural enclave until suburban Atlantans seeking more affordable homes began building there in recent years. As a result, the county's population has exploded and diversified.

The U.S. census estimated the county grew 53.4 percent between 2000 and 2006. In six years, its black population more than quintupled, now representing 2.9 percent, or about 4,000 residents. That's still low compared to the average of 30 percent statewide.

Jennifer Brett contributed to this report.