

**P1. Other Identifier:** Allensworth Historic Town Site

**\*P2. Location:**  Not for Publication  Unrestricted

**\*a. County:** Tulare

and (P2b and P2c or P2d. Attach a Location Map as necessary.)

**\*b. USGS 7.5' Quad:**

**Date:**

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**;** M.D.

**B.M.**

c. Address: State Highway 43, 9 miles west of State Highway 99

City: Allensworth

Zip: 93219

d. UTM: Zone: 10 ; mE/ mN (G.P.S.)

e. Other Locational Data: (e.g., parcel #, directions to resource, elevation, etc., as appropriate) Elevation:

**\*P3a. Description:** (Describe resource and its major elements. Include design, materials, condition, alterations, size, setting, and boundaries) Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park, which contains the historic town site of Allensworth, is located in the southern San Joaquin Valley on State Highway 43, eighteen miles south of Corcoran and approximately the same distance north of Wasco. Its closest neighboring towns are Earlimart, located on Highway 99 about 11 miles due east; and Alpaugh, located about six miles northwest of Allensworth on County Road J-22. Allensworth is approximately 75 miles south of Fresno and 38 miles north of Bakersfield. The park is bordered on its east side by Highway 43 and the rail lines of the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway.

The original settlement of Allensworth had 8 commercial and public buildings, and 31 residential dwellings. Architecture was typical of southern San Joaquin Valley's small farming communities. Today, Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park encompasses 240 acres, and includes the historic town site, a campground, and open, undeveloped farm land. The historic town site consists of approximately 15 square blocks and 60 acres, containing seven intersecting streets, a park visitor center, and 22 restored or reconstructed historic buildings. Buildings of note in the town site today, and central to the life and history of the original settlement, include the Allensworth School, the Mary Dickerson Memorial Library, Hindsman's General Store, the Singleton Cash Store, the First Baptist Church, and the Colonel Allensworth home.

**\*P3b. Resource Attributes:** HP2-single family property, HP4-ancillary building, HP5-hotel/motel, HP6-1-3 story commercial building

**\*P4. Resources Present:**  Building  Structure  Object  Site  District  Element of District  Other (Isolates, etc.)

P5a. Allensworth School – central to the town's community life.



P5b. Description of Photo: 090-P57335; Allensworth School, March 2008

**\*P6. Date Constructed/Age and Sources:**  Historic  Prehistoric  Both

**\*P7. Owner and Address:** California State Parks, Sacramento, California

**\*P8. Recorded by:** Diane Barclay, California State Parks

**\*P9. Date Recorded:** 5/10/2012

**\*P10. Survey Type:** California Historic Landmark

**\*P11. Report Citation:** (Cite survey report and other sources, or enter "none.")

**\*Attachments:**  NONE  Location Map  Sketch Map  Continuation Sheet  Building, Structure, and Object Record  Archaeological Record  District Record  Linear Feature Record  Milling Station Record  Rock Art Record  Artifact Record  Photograph Record  Other (List):

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\*Date: 5/10/2012

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**\*P3a. Description:**

The park is located on the outer edge of the Tulare Lake Basin and the general terrain is extremely flat. Large deposits of alkali and saline salts are visible on the ground surface. Allensworth's early citizens conducted a successful tree planting program. Today vegetation is extremely limited due to critical water shortages experienced by the town over the years. A very few trees exist near the Colonel Allensworth home, the schoolhouse, the state park visitor center, and the camping area.

**\*P3b. Resource Attributes:** HP15-educational building, HP16-religious building, HP17-railroad depot, HP28-street furniture, HP30-trees/vegetation, HP32-rural open space, HP33-farm/ranch, HP36-ethnic minority property: AA African Americans, HP37-highways/trails, HP46-walls/gates/fences.

**\* Significance: Theme:** Self-determination/racial advancement      **Area:** Ethnic Heritage – African American  
**Period of Significance:** 1908–1918

Allensworth, established in 1908 in the Central region of California, as the first, last, and only town in the state that was financed, founded, and governed by African Americans. The town stands as a testament to its founders' vision of self-determination and full human potential for America's black citizens. It continues to be a source of cultural pride and heritage for California's African American citizens and is an excellent example of the pioneering spirit that has characterized all of California's people for centuries.

Historic Context

The town of Allensworth arose during a period in America's history when African Americans throughout the country pursued a quality of life greater than could be realized in a white majority society that continued to deny social, economic, and political equality to black citizens. In the decades following the end of the Civil War, thousands of African Americans fled the South, with its Jim Crow laws and racial violence, in search of better opportunities. Leading African Americans gave voice to the unrest. W. E. B. Dubois argued that black citizens must not settle for second class status, and instead must actively reject discriminatory laws and attitudes and demand the full rights of citizenship. Booker T. Washington countered such arguments with an accommodationist approach which focused less on directly fighting the inequities of American society and more on improving the educational, vocational and moral condition of black citizens, often in settings completely separate from whites. Many African Americans did choose to form communities of their own. All-black towns sprang up, some in the south but the majority in the west and southwest. Oklahoma alone had over two dozen black communities. The intent was to create environments in which African Americans lived free of discrimination and in control of all aspects of civic and private life. Towns met this goal with varying degrees of success or failure depending on their ability to maintain economic viability. The majority of the towns did not succeed in operating independently from white society, as many had to depend on white promoters and white communities for financial and infrastructure support.

At the time of Allensworth's inception, African Americans in California, as in the rest of the nation, pursued the promises of democracy even as they, too, struggled against cultural and institutional racism. Some black Californians created their own social and commercial hubs within greater white communities; others joined in the movement to build communities away from oppressive white society. In California's Central Valley, all-black communities existed at Fowler and Bowles in Fresno County, and African American ranching collectives operated on the outskirts of Bakersfield and Paso Robles. In 1903, an African American organization in Los Angeles spearheaded efforts to establish a black agricultural colony in Sidewinder Valley near Victorville, while another organization attempted to create all-black communities within San Bernardino County. These endeavors, and similar settlements in other parts of California, often fell short of achieving the character of truly independent civic entities. Most were agricultural enclaves that provided a community of support for African American farmers and ranchers, but remained heavily dependent upon surrounding white communities for municipal and commercial services.

Allensworth stands out from other all-black towns by the degree to which the vision of self-determination was realized, and the impact that vision, in the form of a truly independent town, had on African Americans throughout California and the nation. The town of Allensworth was the culmination of its leading founder Colonel Allen Allensworth's life

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focus to help black Americans reach their full potential as a people. Born into slavery in 1842, Allensworth escaped during the Civil War and served in the Union Army and later in the Navy. After the war, Allensworth studied the ministry earning his ordination as a Baptist minister. In 1886 Allensworth was appointed chaplain to the all-black 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Buffalo Soldiers. Allensworth served the unit with distinction for twenty years. Upon his retirement in 1906, Allensworth received the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, the highest rank ever awarded an African American at that time.

Colonel Allensworth was an admirer of Booker T. Washington, and like Washington, believed African Americans had to develop and believe in their own capabilities as citizens before they could convince white society of the same. While stationed with the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry at Angel Island in California as well as camps in Arizona, Utah, and Montana, Allensworth created schools for his men, training the brightest soldiers to teach their peers. He developed a system of teaching that included visual aids and a course of graded levels of study. Additionally, he included vocational training that provided soldiers with marketable skills for their life after military service. The success of his program convinced the Army to incorporate Allensworth's educational program into the training for all soldiers.

Upon retirement from the military, Allensworth, his wife Josephine, and their two daughters, eventually settled in Los Angeles where he continued his efforts to advance the standing of African Americans, preaching his message throughout the region and joining ranks with like-minded individuals. Creation of the town of Allensworth provided the opportunity to put into practice all that Allensworth, Washington and others had advocated about self-determination for the black race. Allensworth and his co-founders envisioned the town as a "unique school of citizenship. . . . We intend to demonstrate to the world that we can *be* and *do*. . . . If we expect to be given credit for our efforts and achievements, people of our race must be in a community where the responsibilities of its municipal government are upon them and them alone."

At the time of Allensworth's founding in the early 1900s, California experienced an increase in population, and one of the state's fastest growing areas was the San Joaquin Valley. In the Valley, large tracts of public land previously held by the railroads became available for purchase. There was a boom of individual farming interests and creation of small farming communities. Land speculators such as William H. O'Bryan and his Pacific Farming Company bought and sold extensive land holdings in both the San Joaquin and the Imperial Valleys. In 1905 O' Bryan helped establish the town of Alpaugh in the San Joaquin Valley. More importantly, in 1908 he agreed to sell land just a few miles south of Alpaugh, to Colonel Allen Allensworth and his California Colony and Home Promoting Association. Allensworth and his Association partners chose to establish their town in the San Joaquin Valley after finding no one willing to sell land to them closer to Los Angeles. Even in the Valley, O' Bryan's Pacific Farming Company was one of the few companies willing to sell to African Americans. O' Bryan charged the Allensworth pioneers almost double what whites paid, but the lack of alternate choices plus the promise of a Pacific Farming Company-funded water system, sealed the deal.

From the start, Allensworth was to be a town in the fullest sense, not merely a colony to support and be supported by African American farmers. To that end, while agriculture was the primary form of occupation for many of the town's citizens, farmers were not the only demographic sought after when promoting the town. The founders consciously recruited individuals who would ensure the independent viability of the town, such as merchants, teachers, hoteliers, restaurateurs, and individuals with skills in nursing and midwifery, pharmacology, construction, and plumbing and irrigation. Colonel Allensworth also recruited some of his former Buffalo Soldiers, promoting the town as a secure home site where soldiers could apply the education and training they had received while in military service.

For its inhabitants, Allensworth represented an opportunity to achieve a level of civil liberties far too long denied to them. Allensworth's pioneers were fully invested in the cause of self-determination. They formed their own governing body, the Allensworth Progressive Association to oversee all aspects of civic life. They were able to get the county to designate Allensworth as its own school district, judicial district, and voting district, which enabled Allensworth citizens to directly shape and control the community in which they lived. The townspeople elected their own school board members, constable, and the first African American justice of the peace in California. They built and staffed their own

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school and library, and the town had its own branch of the U. S. Postal service. The library became one of the first branch libraries of the Tulare County Free Library system. Allensworth pioneers owned and ran the town's commercial enterprises including the general stores, the hotel and restaurant, the bakery, and the barber shop. The town had its own literary society, orchestra and music groups, youth organizations, women's associations, and its own chapters of the NAACP and the United Negro Improvement Association. The town had a vigorous religious life with the Baptist, Methodist, and Seventh Day Adventist faiths represented.

Allensworth's citizens were committed to the financial viability of their town as well, voting to tax themselves as a way to support the school, municipal water system, and other community endeavors. The presence of the railroad was vital to the town's economic stability. Lack of access to railroads and the trade associated with them had resulted in the demise of other all-black towns throughout the nation. Allensworth, as a regular stop on the Santa Fe Railroad, had access to markets for its goods and the benefits of all other trade associated with the rail line. Also aiding the town's financial well-being were individuals throughout California and other states who, inspired by the town and what it represented, purchased land in Allensworth even though they lived elsewhere.

While Allensworth's all-black character made it unique among the small farming towns of California's Central region, the town was not isolated in that uniqueness. Allensworth citizens established positive relationships with the surrounding white communities, and through trade and revenue activities contributed to the economy of the region. The Allensworth Girls Glee Club traveled throughout the area and was well received in the many white communities where they performed. Favorable articles about the town appeared frequently in African American, and white newspapers. Town leaders promoted plans to create a vocational institute at Allensworth similar to Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute (the plan ultimately proved unsuccessful).

By 1914, the town of Allensworth's viability, like that of many black towns before it, began to erode. Three main factors contributed to the town's demise. Colonel Allensworth, the town's leading voice and figure of inspiration, was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident. The Santa Fe Railroad moved the depot stop to the white town of Alpaugh; the loss of railroad-generated revenue fatally undermined Allensworth's economy. The town's water supply had started to dry up, in part due to the region's infrequent rain patterns and increasing demands on groundwater supplies, and in part to Pacific Farming Company's failure to provide the promised water-pumping system. Allensworth families began moving away in search of better economic prospects, especially with the onset of World War I and later World War II and the promise of war industry jobs to the north.

Allensworth's decline as a town did not in any way equate to a lessening of its significance. For the first decade of its existence, the town of Allensworth succeeded in realizing the vision of self-determination advocated by Colonel Allensworth and Booker T. Washington, and desired by generations of African American citizens. African Americans from the San Francisco Bay Area, the Los Angeles region, from other western states and beyond were inspired enough by its purpose and promise to pull up roots and join in the experiment.

The lasting significance of Allensworth is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that sixty years after its founding, descendants of the original pioneers along with later residents of the town, successfully lobbied and worked with the California Department of Parks and Recreation to classify 240 acres of the town site as a State Historic Park. As stated in the general plan for the park, "Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park was established for the primary purpose of providing to all Californians and all Americans an example of the achievements and contributions Black Americans have made to the history and development of California and the nation." Over the last forty years, the Department of Parks and Recreation has restored or reconstructed many of the town's significant structures, including the school house, the library, Colonel Allensworth's home, the Hindsman and Singleton Cash stores, the hotel, the First Baptist church, and a number of homes of the original pioneers. The importance of the town is further demonstrated by the hundreds of individuals from all over California who annually travel down to the site for the Re-dedication event in October. Black history events held at the site throughout each year are equally well-attended. In October of 2008, the town's Centennial celebration drew over 4,0000 people of all races and from every part of the country. School children each year travel by bus and by train to tour the site, sit at the desks in the classroom, and learn the town's history

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often from descendants of the original pioneers. Former residents are counted among the ranks of the site's docents and volunteers. A non-profit foundation, the Friends of Allensworth, has chapters throughout California and actively promotes the Allensworth story at community events around the state, while also supporting programs and events at the town site.

People

While Colonel Allen Allensworth is the person most closely associated with the town, other individuals are equally important contributors to the site's cultural and historic significance.

William Payne, originally from Ohio where he earned a college degree and teaching certificate, arrived in California in the early 1900s only to learn that legal restrictions and social prejudices made teaching positions virtually impossible. Payne was working as a janitor when he joined Colonel Allensworth as a partner in founding the town of Allensworth. Payne was as committed to the cause of self-determination as Colonel Allensworth, and believed that education was vital to the race's advancement. He trained other teachers and taught beyond the basic curriculum adding art, music, and Black history studies. He established the Girls Glee Club, the drama society, and youth groups. Allensworth School and its many educational and cultural activities became the center of the town's community life and Payne was its guiding spirit. Following the death of Colonel Allensworth, Payne along with Oscar Overr took over leadership of the town, and tried unsuccessfully to bring to fruition Colonel Allensworth's plans for a vocational institute. Later, Payne moved to El Centro, California, serving as principal of all-black Douglass High School. Payne once said of teaching and his pioneer experience at Allensworth, "We build bridges that we will never use, plant trees that we will never see; we do all these things for those who will come behind us."

Colonel Allensworth's wife, Josephine Leavell Allensworth was another of the town's guiding figures. Even before the founding of Allensworth, Josephine Allensworth shared in her husband's efforts to improve the condition of the black race. At Angel Island while Colonel Allensworth recovered from an injury, Josephine and her daughters took over conducting classes for the soldiers. After moving to the town of Allensworth, Josephine served as one of the first school trustees, supporting William Payne in all of his educational efforts. She helped found the Women's Improvement League, and actively worked at building up the town's community life. Most importantly, Josephine Allensworth provided the money and land with which to establish the town's library, naming it after her mother, helping to get it designated as a branch of the Tulare County library system, and inspiring others to donate to its collections.

Oscar Overr came to Allensworth to manage a demonstration farm that would show the variety of crops that could be grown at the town site. Overr became an ardent supporter of the town and its cause. He invested in large amounts of acreage, establishing a poultry farm; Overr's wife, Cora, served on the school board, and the Overrs are credited with convincing the Pacific Farming Company to donate lumber for the school building. Overr's greatest contribution to the town's historic significance occurred in 1914 when he was elected as California's first African American justice of the peace. Overr, along with Payne, took over leadership of the town following Colonel Allensworth's death, and became a leading voice arguing for creation of the Allensworth vocational institute.

Buildings

The majority of buildings now extant in Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park are reconstructions. Others such as the Allensworth School, the library, and Colonel Allensworth's house, were extensively restored. Because of the extensive reconstruction and restoration processes, it is doubtful the buildings have retained the historical integrity to qualify for significance individually.

Two buildings that were at the heart of town life and symbolized the townspeople's commitment to self-reliance and racial advancement were the schoolhouse and the library. The Allensworth Elementary School, located at the west end

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of the historic town site, was constructed in 1914 and is 40' x 40'. Its construction is wood frame with wood siding, cedar shingles and a concrete foundation. The building's interior can be separated by a sliding partition and has two dressing rooms, and a stage. The school house served as a school until 1972. California State Parks did restoration work on the building in 1976-77. During the period of historic significance, the schoolhouse represented the community's commitment to achieving the full blessings and highest standards of education. The building also served as the town's community center, where club meetings, theater productions, music programs and other social events occurred. It was used by the Methodist church for Sunday services, and was the town's polling place for elections.

The Mary Dickinson Memorial Library is located in the northwest section of the town, approximately 625 feet north of the school. From 1909 to 1914, this building served as the Allensworth School, and was situated on the town's Stowe Street. Upon completion of the new school building in 1914, Mrs. Josephine Leavell Allensworth provided the money and land to move this building to its present location and refurbish it as a library. Colonel Allensworth donated his private collection of books to stock the library. Allensworth citizens' commitment to reading was every bit as great as that to other educational pursuits. Local newspapers reported "Allensworth Folks Great Readers." That the right and opportunity to read had been denied to generations of black Americans, was something of which all African American citizens were keenly aware. The value and cultural significance of the Allensworth library, therefore, inspired individuals well beyond the confines of the town; donations of books came from all over California and the country.

Sketch Map: Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park: Historic Town Site of Allensworth

