

Historical Highlights
vol. 7, no. 1

Black Immigration and Settlement,
pp. 2-?

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Greetings from your neighbors on the Shawnee County Historical Society's Board of Trustees:

A new year brings new challenges and opportunities and 2018 is no different. We have strengthened and energized your Board of Trustees by welcoming new trustees Christina Valdivia-Alcala, Linda Jeffrey, and Bob Totten. We are fortunate to have these experienced community leaders working for your organization.

We continue a serious, comprehensive and exhaustive planning process called StEPs which will help us conform to best practices for long-term sustainability. Our intent is to bring your organization more sharply into focus so that we can better address the heritage education needs of our community, be better stewards of our historical structures, tell the stories of your families, businesses, and neighborhoods and how Shawnee County heritage fits into the historical fabric of our county, state and nation as a hallmark of freedom.

We share your enthusiasm for history and pride in Shawnee County heritage. We want to appeal to your interests. Let us hear from you. Thank you. — **Tom Ellis**

BLACK IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

This article was originally published in *The Melting Pot: Shawnee County's Ethnic Communities*, SCHS Bulletin No. 58, November, 1981. This story has been edited for this newsletter by **Chris Bower**.

AMONG the first Blacks in Northeast Kansas were slaves owned by supporters of the peculiar institution prior to and during the turbulent territorial period. Both White—including government officials, missionaries and Indian traders—and Indians were the masters," according to Historian Robert A. Swan.* [Robert A. Swan's "The Ethnic Heritage of Topeka, Kansas," 1974.] But he says "among," indicating there were a number of free Blacks in the U.S. and Kansas even before slaves were introduced to the Indian Territory.

In regards to slavery, there was fierce controversy in Kansas territorial days concern the question of whether the territory should be slave or free. One Pioneer woman, Fannie Cole, wrote of the slavery issue, stating that Indianola, an early rival of Topeka, located

where the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Plant now stands, was a pro-slavery town, being settled mostly by Missourians (proslavery). Mrs. Young owned two Negroes; [her nephew Louis] Harris, had one.

Indianola and Tecumseh were the two primary proslave towns. The influence of pro-slave people can be seen from the fact that Tecumseh, now little more than a suburb of Topeka, was the first county seat of Shawnee County. Other slave holders brought Blacks from the Border States and the Deep South. Judge Rush Elmore of the Kansas Territorial Supreme Court, brought fourteen slaves from Alabama to Lecompton; but soon removed them to his farm one mile south of Tecumseh, in Shawnee County. There he built an imposing home, and is reported to have owned and worked up to sixty slaves on a large farm four and one-half miles south of Tecumseh.

Slavery in Kansas was opposed diligently by free-state men, but racism was present among even them. The desire to exclude Blacks from the territory was carried on even into the early statehood period. The question of slavery

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brought on an all-night session on that open prairie crossroads, Big Springs. As chairman of the committee of thirteen on platform, Jim Lane led the committee to accept and propose anti-Negro principles, against fading minority of one of the committee. "The best interest of Kansas required a population of white men," was the oft-repeated dictum. "Negroes of every stripe, bond and fee, should be excluded." All in all, there were five "wherefores" and six "resolves" in the platform. As one

Robinson in 1862, and has faithfully and honorably served the state ever since." At the time of his funeral the state offices were closed and state officers attended in a body, and flags placed at half mast during the funeral.

With the coming of the Civil War Blacks were ready to flood Kansas. They poured across the Missouri, free and escaped slaves, and headed for the numerous free-state towns such as Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Topeka, all of which still have relatively large Black

area, known as Ritchie's Addition (originally a track of land owned by John Ritchie, south of Tenth Street and east of Jackson Street, that was part of Topeka township. Some of the Exodusters, who arrived by train mostly in North Topeka, remained there to establish a little village known as Redmonville which was often referred to by Topekans as "up in the sands." In the meantime, "Mud Town" was located in the Shunganunga bottoms where Fifteenth and Adams Streets intersected, adjacent to Highland Park-Pierce area.

As is obvious by some of the previous descriptions, Kansas was not all that the immigrants had hoped it would be upon their arrival. This letter from a young female Exoduster to her mother in Mississippi gives one an idea of what things were like for black colonists in the early '80s:

I am so uneasy about you; there has been so much confusion in the country about the col-

ored people going to Kansas, I thought it had reached Fayette and you had gone too. But let me give you a piece of advice: for the Lord sake don't you go, if you are just getting along tolerable you better stay where you are, than to go to Kansas and starve and freeze to death as a great many have done. Many have went and now wish to return; some have sickened and died. Hundreds have come back, and more are wanting to come... I am very sorry to hear that you are all stirred up, but I tell you, as before, do not break up where you



Temporary Home for Exodusters, Floral Hall, Fair Grounds. Sketch from "Harper's Weekly," July 5, 1879, by Henry Worrall, Topeka. —*Kansas State Historical Society*

historian, John D. Bright, put it: "At Big Springs assuredly the anti-slaveryism was of a diluted mild-and-water type."

But even with all the debate over Negro exclusion, nothing was done definitely, and much as some Kansas disliked it, Blacks came to "the land of milk and honey," Kansas. For example, Daniel Wilder ["Annals of Kansas," 1985] cited the case of a Black, David Ware—chief janitor in the State House until his death. "He escaped from slavery, came to Topeka in December in 1861...went to work for Secretary

communities. As the War became an all-out crusade against slavery, as Black soldiers from Kansas distinguished themselves in this crusade, and as numbers of Black immigrants to Kansas reached the thousands, spokesmen for exclusion were silenced and Blacks became secure in their new Kansas homes. By 1870 the Negro population had reached 17,108.

The Blacks originally settled in Topeka within four blocks of the south bank of the Kansas River, which later became known as "the Bottoms." The spread in this

are: if you do you will worsen your conditions, for if you ever attempt to go to Kansas, and get there, you will be sorry that you left Fayette. Many have left and gone, and some are still on the banks waiting to go, but the boats will not carry them. Those that can come back are perfectly willing to come and glad of the chance to get to their old homes again.

So my dear, do not let this disturb your mind any more; make yourself satisfied and remain where you are, and try and do the best you can.* [From a letter from Pauline White to her mother, published in the *Fayette (Mississippi) Chronicle*. No date.]

On April 28, 1879, a convention of Blacks was held in Topeka to accomplish the forming of a permanent organization to look after the interest of the colored emigrants to Kansas, and to render necessary aid to such of the emigrants as really deemed it. Thus was formed the Kansas colored State Emigration Bureau, with Rev. T. W. Henderson and W. L. Eagleson, the two black editors of the *Colored Citizen*, as its leaders. Support was slow in coming, however, because the resident Black population did not relish the thought of antagonizing their white neighbors by identifying with the itinerant Exodusters, who were looked on as being diseased-carrying vagabonds, if not outright inferior.

The situation in the urban area of Shawnee County was no better. In fact, where the blacks resided while searching for employment in the capital, were makeshift residences where whites would allow

them to stay until they were on their feet. For instance, a newspaper reporter had the following article published:

I have paid two visits to the fair grounds, about two miles out of the city, where the "exodusters" are received. Nothing could be more picturesquely pathetic than the scenes here presented. The fair grounds comprise a racing course, ample

HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Ho for Kansas!

Brethren, Friends, & Fellow Citizens:
I feel thankful to inform you that the
REAL ESTATE
AND
Homestead Association,
Will Leave Here the
15th of April, 1878,
In pursuit of Homes in the Southwestern
Lands of America, at Transportation
Rates, cheaper than ever
was known before.
For full information inquire of
Benj. Singleton, better known as old Pap,
NO. 5 NORTH FRONT STREET.
Beware of Speculators and Adventurers, as it is a dangerous thing
to fall in their hands.
Nashville, Tenn., March 18, 1878.

—Kansas State Historical Society

*space for cattle shows, hundreds of stalls, and two large buildings for business purposes, dinners, etc. In these two buildings the newly-arrived Negroes are given quarters. On the day of my first visit there was ample evidence of neglect, if not inhumanity. In one of the buildings lay an aged negro man, apparently dying of dysentery.** [From "Negro clipping," no date or source, Kansas State Historical Society].

The freed Blacks began to populate Topeka and these early set-

tlers established themselves in the little capital. Unlike later arrivals, these first Negroes rapidly developed a community and in the Spring of 1870 a frame school house for Negro children was constructed. More educational facilities were constructed. In the December 21, 1879, *Commonwealth* mention is made of schools in Topeka, "when Lincoln School was dedicated today, with an appropriate program of exercises.... Students of the colored schools were allowed to enter this building for the first and probably the last time, and together with the pupils of other city schools created quite a problem to crowd them all inside."

According to one federal report, 7,000 Negroes had reached Topeka by August 1, 1879, and from 100 to 300 arrived weekly.... The aggregate of this remarkable "Exodus" [as the Negroes named the movement] for the year 1879 was about 25,000. In 1880, the total swelled to 40,000. About 3,000, most of them from Tennessee, remained permanently in Topeka.

By 1879, the Exodus had grown to such proportions that crude barracks were erected in order to provide some form of dwelling in which the Blacks could find shelter. However, the waves of Negroes poured in so heavily that the Exodusters were crammed into the barracks under the poorest of conditions. One account reported two or three hundred people, men, women and children, crowded in the building half-fed, half-clothed, in the bitter cold.

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Despite all the shortcomings of Kansas on their arrival, there was no stemming the tide. Blacks continued to pour into Shawnee County. On May 27, 1879 the *Topeka Commonwealth* printed a letter from Governor St. John. "... One man was in my office yesterday who has a wife and five children here, and when asked by me if he was furnished transportation and provisions to carry him back to his home in Louisiana, whether he would go, replied 'that while it was true he was here with his family, entirely destitute of anything to eat, or the means to obtain it, yet he would rather himself, wife and children should starve to death here in Kansas than to return and be subjected again to the cruel outrages and wrongs that he and his race had suffered for the last ten years.'"

Many Negroes did well in Topeka. Scott Smith, a resident of Topeka as early as 1872, was one of the early Black barbers. In his time he probably had the largest shop of any Negro in Kansas. Scott opened up in the basement of 603 Kansas Avenue, and before he vacated that location he had a ten-chair shop immediately below the book and stationery store of Will O. King. From its location he moved into new quarters west to the Windsor Hotel in the south end of the same block. Here he added several more chairs and has "...a swell, up-to-date shop." He made money and invested heavily in real estate and at one time was considered quite wealthy. During the decline of the boom in the late 1880s, Scott lost quite heavily on some of his investments. By the end of the decade of the 1870s more than 3,000 of the Black immigrants had chosen to

remain in the rail center at which they had first arrived in Kansas—Topeka, the headquarters of the immigrants from Tennessee.

As soon as the 1880s arrived

Lane Streets north of Huntoon and south of West 10th Street.

The first problem for the immigrants was providing shelter. They built such houses as they could,



SHILOH BAPTIST CHURCH

1201 Buchanan, Topeka

The most architecturally distinguished of the more recent Black churches is the Shiloh Baptist. Built in 1926, it retains many elements from the Greek Revival style of a much earlier period.

500 more Exodusters came from Tennessee, bought parcels of land and secured dwellings in the western outskirts of the city in a locality known as King's Addition and popularly dubbed Tennessee Town, a name it still bears. Tennessee town was built on prairie, barren and nondescript, one report claiming that here was but a single, lonely locust tree between the edge of the city and Washburn college—then south and west of the city. The little colony was located mostly on Buchanan, Lincoln and

most of them the cheapest kind of hovels, destitute of paint and plastering. The Kansas elements were particularly troublesome for the young community with such marginal shelter on the outskirts of town. Slowly structures of a more lasting nature were constructed in Tennessee Town. Churches and small businesses developed rapidly in the early 1880s. by 1881 Guard's Hall, at 503 Kansas Avenue, had become the center of community involvement within the colony. An organization called

the "Colored United Links" or the "Topeka Links" used this hall several times in the mid-eighties for a "National Convention by the Colored United Links," as well as for celebrations of the independence of the West Indies, with speakers including governor John P. St. John.

Two other buildings of importance to the Black colony were located in or near Tennessee Town—Shiloh Baptist church and somewhat later, the Central Congregational Church, the later being the pastorate of Dr. Charles M. Sheldon, author of the best-selling novel, *In His Steps*, and missionary to the Black community in Topeka.

Shiloh Baptist Church, incorporated April 5, 1880, is on the southwest corner of 12th and Buchanan, the site of the original building. The Central Congregational Church, one block south at Huntoon and Buchanan, and its pastor, the Rev. Charles M. Sheldon, served the adjacent Black community in various ways.

Tennessee town was once noted for its lawlessness. According to one source, "Andy Jordan built a hall in the middle of the colony. It was a wide one-story building and was used for dances. Liquor was always to be had, and the dances which were held weekly usually wound up with a cutting affair of some sort."

The emigrant Blacks could find little more than menial labor. An 1895 census of Tennessee Town frequently showed occupations such as "odd jobs," "washing," "day laborer," "delivery man," and "teamster." Many of the best-known blacks in Topeka were barbers or employed at the State House. Fred Alexander, a black barber who arrived in Topeka

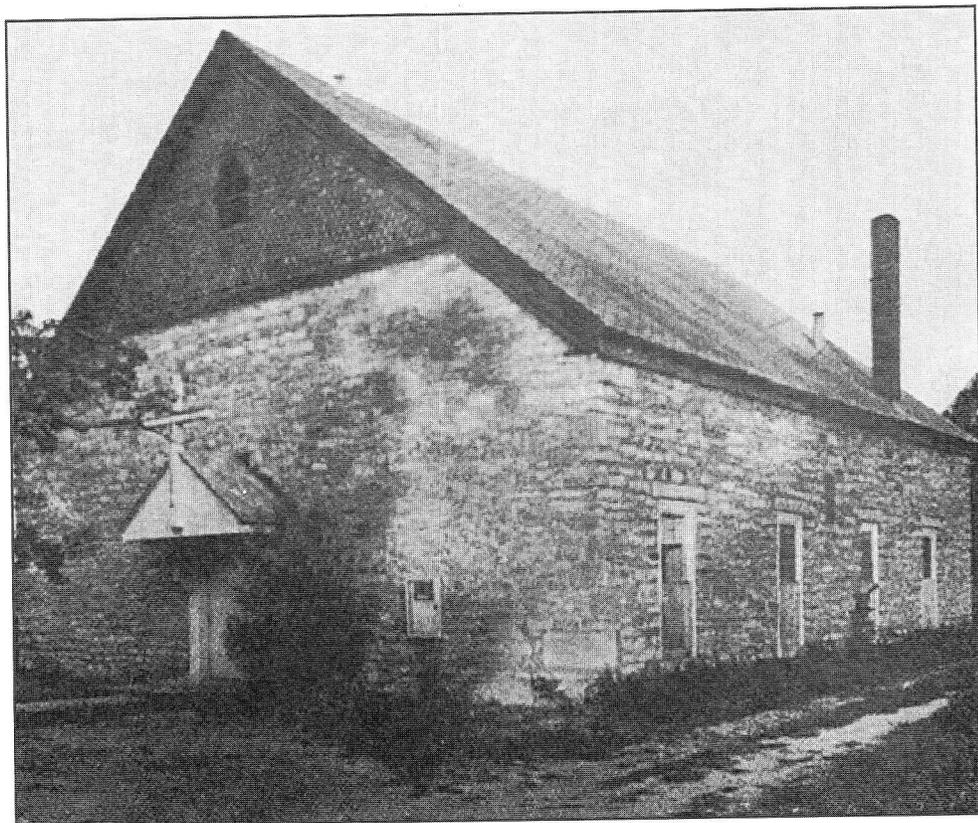
from Tennessee in 1879, became an apprentice barber and worked for many years in the shop of Calahan & Brown, 855 Kansas Avenue.

Tennessee Town was not the only black settlement in Topeka. The original stopping place of the Exodusters in North Topeka, where the barracks were located, became a community even before Tennessee Town, although never so prominent in the minds of Topekans.

One of the oldest structures in

on the gable ends reminiscent of Swedish or Russian buildings.

By the 1890s the Blacks of Topeka had developed an immense interest in politics, to such an extent that in the mayoral election of 1891, their votes made the difference between A. B. Quinton and the incumbent R. L. Cofran. A newspaper article told much of the story: "The Quinton strikers boast that they have registered every colored male and female vote in the city and ask defiantly: 'What



ASBURY CHAPEL

835 North Van Buren, North Topeka

Another of North Topeka fine stone churches is the Asbury Chapel. Begun by the North Topeka Methodist Episcopal in 1874, the building existed only as a roofed basement for several years, hence its nickname, the Flat-Top Church. In 1880 the Asbury Methodist Episcopal, a Black congregation like the Pilgrim Baptists, bought the church which they completed after nine years.

North Topeka which has remained intact is the Asbury M.E. Church, 855 N. Van Buren. The story-and-a-half stone building has shingles

are you going to do about it? Well, just wait, Brer Quinton, and see. The good people of Topeka will

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see you later.”* [*Kansas Democrat*, March 28, 1891.] Cofran won with a plurality of less than two hundred votes.

Blacks were seen by the turn of the century on the Shawnee County Sheriff’s posse, and in courtrooms in the County Courthouse, in the form of Attorney Elisha Scott as well as one of the nation’s earliest women lawyers, Lutie Lytle.

Summer City was a town pro-



MISS LUTIE A. LYTLE

“Only Colored Woman Lawyer in America”

—*Mail & Breeze*, Sept. 17, 1899

jected “for Negroes, by Negroes,” and was to be located about five miles east of Topeka, the town company was formed at Topeka, April 20, 1896, for the purpose of purchasing lands and building homes for blacks. The prime movers of the company were some of the most prominent Blacks of Shawnee County. The corporation had a capital stock of \$20,000, divided into shares of \$20 each. No evidence that this company ever plotted a town or built a home has been located. The charter was filed with the Secretary of state

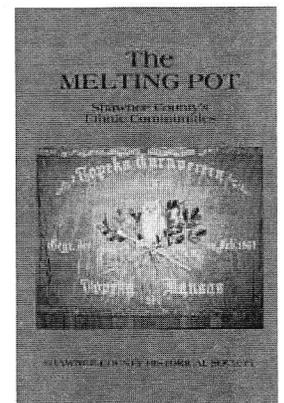
the day the organization was effected.

Not far west of Summer City was the Industrial Education Institute, or “colored institute,” as it was popularly known. This was begun in the spring of 1895 by Edward Stephans and Miss Izie Reddick, as a kindergarten on Washing on Street. In 1896 it was moved to a two-story building on Kansas Avenue near Second Street. In the fall of 1896 the institute purchased its first permanent home a dilapidated two-story brick and stone building situated on two and one-half lots on South Kansas Avenue between Seventeenth and Eighteenth Streets. With growth and public recognition on the part of Topekans over the next five years (not to mention sizeable grants from the state legislature), the institute decided to buy a farm of 105 acres one and a half miles east of Topeka in 1903.

By the turn of the century the hard work and education of Shawnee County’s Blacks had improved their lot somewhat, but conditions were still poor in the most instances, and continued to be so deep into the twentieth century. Some few Blacks had moved to the country outside Topeka to try their hand at agriculture. For instance, about 1914, a Black family named Hays owned a sorghum mill in Silver Lake Township near the intersection of Kansas Avenue and Berberick Road. Many more remained at the menial tasks offered them in the city, such as at Hale’s Tours Theater at Vinewood Park where a white-jacketed Negro “Pullman” porter escorted passengers to their seats in a moving picture theater designed to resemble a Pullman railroad coach.

But some Blacks had made sizeable inroads into “the white man’s state.” One of the best examples of these was Nick Chiles, a widely known Topeka publisher business man who had been a resident of Topeka since he came from South Carolina in 1899. Chiles founded the Topeka *Plaindealer* ten years later. He built up a large circulation, not only in Kansas but also in Oklahoma and Missouri. Chiles was more than a publisher. He was a good businessman and owned a fine home at 914 Buchanan as well as a farm in the Kaw Valley near Tecumseh. In 1926 he was a candidate for United States Senator. His newspaper was devoted to the interest of the race, and Chiles was outspoken in his editorial columns on issues of interest to the common people of both races. His work as a publisher had taken him into most of the states of the Union. He was interested in the work of the Kansas Vocational Institute and Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and was instrumental in sending many boys and girls to these institutions. Chiles died in 1929, but another black newspaper, *The Kansas American*, flourished until 1942, edited by Eugene Lucas. When he found that the Army was organizing an entire division for colored soldiers, he folded up his newspaper and enlisted.

—Article from
THE MELTING POT,
SCHS Bulletin
#58



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- Shawnee County Preservation \$ _____
- Historical Programs/Lectures \$ _____
- Bus Rental Grants for School Field Trip (to help make field trips possible) \$ _____
- Ritchie House restoration and maintenance \$ _____



I also want to renew my annual membership:

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Shawnee County Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) organization. FEIN 48-6141221 I wish to be anonymous

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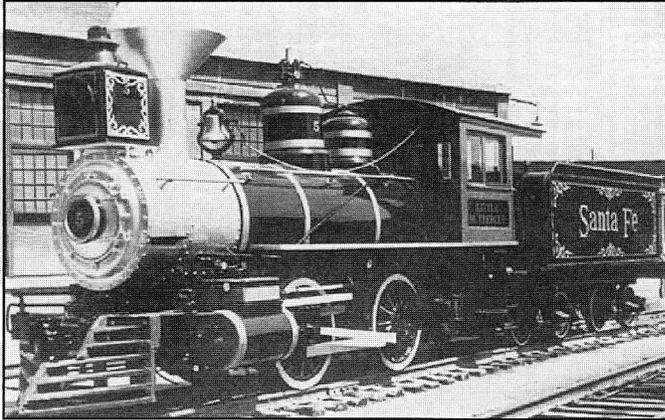
Preservation Awards —Sunday, May 6

Annual Meeting —Sunday, December 2

Focus of this newsletter:

Black Immigration & Settlement

Other ethnic/religious groups with stories about settling in Shawnee County include: **Native Tribes, Germans, Russians, Swedes, Czechs, Mexicans, English, Irish & others.** Specific stories about these groups were also covered in SCHS Bulletin #58, *The Melting Pot*, published in November 1981.



Historical Highlights

February 2018

Tidbit

↓ ...also from *The Melting Pot*

Santa Fe Railway as part of the Melting Pot

It is interesting to recall those who came from foreign lands and from varied backgrounds who also became managers of importance in the Santa Fe Railway organization in Topeka.

Photo credit: <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/61647>

Lighting Freedom's Pathway:
Building Heritage Culture



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