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Historical Highlights
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The Bottoms

This article was written
by **Tom Rodriguez**

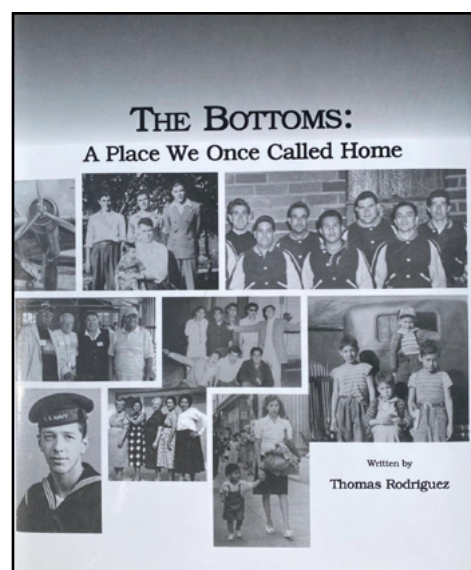


In 1857, because of its proximity to the Kansas River, the area that came to be known as the "Bottoms" was the site of the first homes and neighborhood built in the City of Topeka, Kansas. Within that small area were two businesses that would have a tremendous impact on the City of Topeka. They were the Wolf Packing Company built in 1876 (later the John Morrell Meat Packing Plant), and the King Wrought Iron and Bridge Works opened in 1878 (later the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad

Shops). In addition, in that same area were the Santa Fe Depot and Harvey House opened in 1878, and the Federal Building and Post Office constructed in 1884. In 1905, the Seymour Foods Packing Company began operations at 200 Kansas Avenue and in 1907 the Hill Packing Company started selling dog food in the 100 block on Jefferson Street.

As the City of Topeka grew, the Bottoms area consisted of Adams Street to the East, Sixth Street to the South, First Street to the North and Kansas Avenue to the West, roughly a 27 square block area.

The Bottoms was inhabited primarily by Negroes, Mexican, Russian and German immigrants, American Indians, and poor Whites. It was a low-income neighborhood but was one that was rich in cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity. It was there in that unique environment that I and so many other residents of all races and ethnicities learned racial tolerance. It was also where I acquired my strong work ethics by selling newspapers, shining shoes, setting bowling pins, scavenging junk metal, and selling pies baked by my hardworking mother.



It is a story about growing up in an era very different from the one we live in today. It was a time when families still ate all of their meals together, listened to the radio every night, when home owners sat outside on their porches on hot summer nights, and when everyone knew their neighbors and helped each other when times were tough.

The story of my family in the Bottoms and in the City of Topeka began over 100 years ago in 1913 when my paternal grandparents and my father, age three, arrived in Topeka. In 1920, my maternal grandparents arrived with my mother, who was then age six. —cont., p. 2➔

—cont. from p. 1➔ Like other Mexican immigrants who came to “El Norte” during those years, they were dirt poor, uneducated, and spoke little or no English. However, they were people of strong character, and they stayed and persevered during a time of great adversity.

My parents grew into young adulthood during the early years of the Great Depression during which they and everyone else in America experienced severe economic hardships. As the Great Depression ended, my parents met and were married. In 1941, America declared war on Japan after their infamous attack on Pearl Harbor, and a few days later declared war on Germany. Six of my

uncles served in World War II, three of them saw combat. My Uncle Benny Rodriguez, was wounded at the Battle of the Bulge, was captured by the Germans and spent the remainder of the war in a prisoner of war camp.

In July of 1951, the Bottoms, North Topeka and the lower East Side were ravaged by a great flood. It was that flood that signaled the start of the end for the Bottoms because the area quickly became dilapidated by the extensive water damage. The 1951 Flood also closed forever the John Morrell Meat Packing Plant and other small businesses in the area.

By 1956, talks began to implement an Urban Renewal Program to ad-

dress slum and blighted areas in the City of Topeka. After many years of starts and stops, in March of 1960, the Urban Renewal Program began to acquire properties and relocate residents. By June of 1964, almost all of the residents of the Bottoms had been relocated and the Bottoms neighborhood that once existed in the City of Topeka, Kansas, was relegated to history and to the memory of the thousands of people who once called the Bottoms their home.

To learn more, go to this website <https://tomrodriguezlv.com/tombs-books/the-bottoms-a-place-we-once-called-home/>

Historic Homes Tour, October 16th

It's time for you to purchase a ticket to the **Historic Homes Tour of Topeka** to be held **October 16th** from **1 to 6 pm**. Cost is only **\$75** a ticket and you can send your check or credit card information to **PO Box 2201 Topeka, Kansas 66601**. We will then send your tickets back to you around October 10th. ***This is our major fund raiser and tickets are limited to the first 100.***

The rush for tickets has been outstanding.....so get your information to us as soon as you can. We have five wonderful homes on the tour....and here is an article from the *Topeka Capital Journal* about the event. <https://www.cjonline.com/story/news/2021/09/04/shawnee-county-historical-society-offer-oct-16-historic-homes-tour-five-houses-menniger-hill/5706939001/>



Message from the President: Nate McAlister



The CBA

CBA?

What is a CBA? And what does a CBA have to do with the Shawnee County Historical Society?

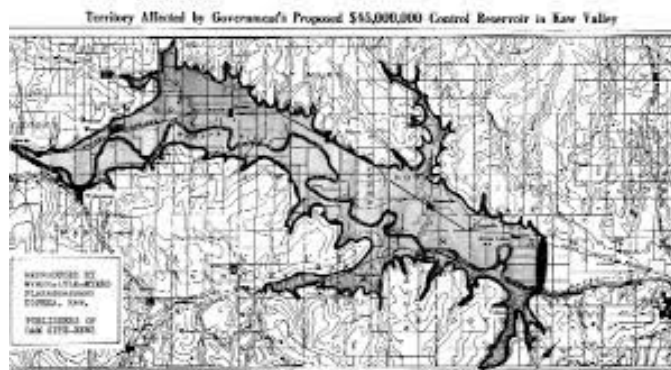
The Classroom Based Assessment or CBA is the Kansas State Department of Education's state assessment for History, Government and Social Studies classes. This assessment is a required assessment for all Kansas school districts this year. Under this assessment model classroom teachers and students will investigate and analyze topics by advancing a claim/thesis, providing evidence, and making an argument. So, what does this have to do with the Shawnee County Historical Society? The CBA will focus on grades 4, 7, and 11. The content of grades 4 and 7 focuses primarily on Kansas History and teachers are being encouraged to seek out their local historical societies and investigate local stories.



Our society has much to offer the teachers and students of Kansas for this upcoming classroom based assessment. We have stories to tell and subjects to be investigated. These stories include the very namesake of our main attraction, John Ritchie. I will not regale you with his tales of heroism and gallantry, as you have probably heard the story on countless occasions. But John

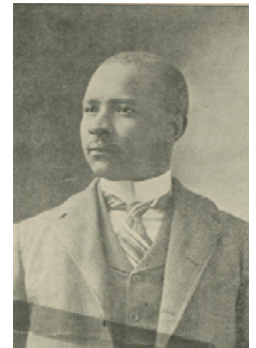
Ritchie's story is not the only story to be told. Stories like Nick Chiles, the African American journalist, editor, and founder of the Topeka Plaindealer. In the depths of segregated America, Nick Chiles and his newspaper,

which ran from 1899-1958, became a clarion call of hope for the future. Or John Armstrong, one of the founders of the Underground Railroad in Topeka and Civil War veteran. Beyond the



Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS Supreme Court case, and even the failed venture known as Lake Kiro, it all has a story to tell. Because history is pervasive, it lives and breathes in everything and our society helps to bring these stories to life. So, the next time you see that student conducting research, in the library, or a

teacher leading a tour, or you hear someone say, "What was the Great Smith Car?" They might be working on a CBA and they might need our help.



stories of the people who made their homes in Shawnee county are stories from the county itself. From the muddy waters of the mighty Kansas River, to Longren Aircraft Company, to the Landmark



Shawnee County Historical Society Members:

Our records indicate it is time to renew and we would appreciate you sending in your payment in the near future. It is support like yours which allow us to continue and promote and preserve the history of Shawnee County.

You can access us by Paypal or send us a check at **SCHS, PO Box 2201, Topeka, Kansas 66601**

Here in the newsletter, there is a form you can fill out and return ➔

Thank you for continued support of our organization!

If you have any questions, please call at 785-234-6097 or email us at ***shawneecountyhistory@gmail.com***

Thank you, Bob Totten

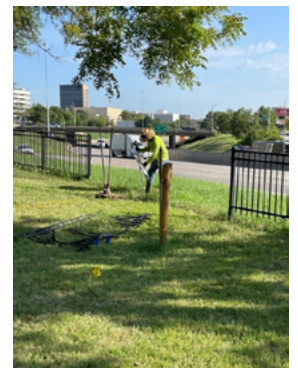
Property Maintenance Update:

About 16 months ago, a vehicle missed the curve on I-70 and ploughed into the fence at 11th and Madison. Since it was city property, we asked the city to get it repaired....but either due to the Covid virus or other things, they were unable to get it fixed until this past June. We are grateful to have the fence fixed as it was a minor eyesore to the patrons who came to the Ritchie House.

Speaking of patrons to the Ritchie House, our visitations continue. Most school children are unable to come for a tour, but the normal out of town visitors

are still in abundance. If you or some of your family members have not seen the oldest house in Topeka, please stop by.

Also, this summer, we contracted with a painter to paint the Ritchie House and the Cox Communications Center. After ten years, any house needs to be maintained and our board of trustees agreed. The Shawnee County Historical Society works hard to keep the two houses in good shape so that others can understand the history of the Underground Railroad and the impact the Ritchie family had on Topeka.



Would you like to support the Shawnee County Historical Society?

Here is your opportunity. Just fill out the following information below and send it to:



Shawnee County Historical Society, PO Box 2201, Topeka, Kansas 66601
or send by email to shawneecountyhistory.org

I want to support:

- | | |
|--|----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Heritage Education for kids | \$ _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shawnee County Preservation | \$ _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Historical Programs/Lectures | \$ _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bus Rental Grants for School Field Trip (to help make field trips possible) | \$ _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ritchie House restoration and maintenance | \$ _____ |

I also want to renew my annual membership:

- | | |
|---|----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> General Membership \$35 | \$ _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Membership \$50 | \$ _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Renovator Level Membership \$100 | \$ _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Level Membership \$150+ | \$ _____ |

Total \$ _____

☐ Credit Card ☐ or PayPal

Name on Card _____

Card Number _____

Exp. ____/____ + code on the back of your card _____

Furniture Returns to the Ritchie Property



Some furniture that used to be in the Ritchie houses on SE Madison were returned to the Cox center June 30th. A small rocker from the 1880's probably purchased by Hale Ritchie for his daughter and a small chest of drawers which may have been made in the 1830's. Mary Jane Ritchie's mother married her stepdad who probably had this chest of drawers made for her after 1832. In 1838, Mary Jane married John Ritchie.

Come by and see the new items on display. We are open from 9 am to 1 pm, Tuesday through Thursday.



P.O. Box 2201, TOPEKA KS 66601-2201

Lighting Freedom's Pathway;
Building Heritage Culture



*Historical
Highlights*
*Sept.
2021*

Mark Your Calendars Society Events: Oct. 2021 - Mar. 2022:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Oct. 16th | Historic Homes Tour , concluding at Governor's Row House , 811 Buchanan, with comments from Paul Post on "History of SBA Hill" | 1-6 pm |
| Oct. 17th | Oral History about the "Kansas Legislature" with Joan Wagon & Patricia Michaelis | 3 pm , by Zoom |
| Oct. 24th | Jack Wiseman : "History of Topeka's Jewish Community" | 3 pm , by Zoom |
| Oct. 31st | Rick Peterson : "Top 25 Sports Events in Shawnee County" | 3 pm , by Zoom |
| Nov. 7th | Elizabeth Taylor : "Chester Woodward Home and the man behind the home" | 3 pm , by Zoom |
| Nov. 14th | Don Chubb : "Topeka Women in History" | 3 pm , by Zoom |
| Nov. 21th | Karen Hastings : Frank Lloyd Wright's "Taliesin West in Scottsdale, AZ" | 3 pm , by Zoom |
| Dec. 5th | Annual Membership Meeting at Topeka Country Club, 2700 SW Buchanan | Noon |