



Ritchie Cemetery Rediscovery: pp. 1-4

Historical Highlights
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Ritchie Cemetery Rediscovery Sparked by Unique Plants

This article was written by **Liz Leech** from material supplied by a group of researchers.

Responding to a Facebook tip about an uncommon prairie plant at Topeka's Ritchie Cemetery, **Jeff Hansen** went over to search for the American vetch plant. He didn't find it at the abandoned burial ground, but in his words, "I found many other unusual and relatively rare plants at the cemetery."

"One is a species of yellow wood violet and it may be the first record of it in Kansas. Exciting stuff for a plant guy!"

Returning frequently to the cemetery, bordered by homes at 27th and Boswell, Hansen, a native plants consultant, has identified flora like Pussytoes, White Trout Lily, May Apple, Green Dragon, Hairy Sunflower, as well as Black Cherry, Shumard Oak and Butternut Hickory trees. Amur honeysuckle had shrouded the woods, choked tiny native plants and obscured some graves. Hansen quickly organized a work party to remove some of

the mounds of the invasive honeysuckle.

In the process, Hansen, who had "zero interest in genealogy," found his curiosity about the cemetery and its occupants kept leading him into a deep research dive. Jan Johnson, another plant enthusiast and a



Kansas baseball history researcher, saw Hansen's posts about his growing interest in the cemetery, and offered to help.

Setting aside, for the moment, the serendipitous fact that wildflowers and native plants from Topeka's earliest days still grow in this city spot, Jan and Jeff found there was a lot to learn about the cemetery.

Both were puzzled by the dearth of factual, traceable information about the Ritchie Cemetery and who was buried in it. Headstones number fewer than a dozen, but a newspaper clipping says the cemetery was once full of headstones. People who had once been slaves were thought to be buried in the five-acre grounds, as were Exodusters, African Americans who left oppression and danger in post-Civil War southern states in the late 1870s. But records typically associated with cemeteries that identify the people buried there haven't surfaced for the Ritchie Cemetery.

Even its common name, "Ritchie Cemetery," draws a question mark. If the name is in honor of Topeka's Col. John Ritchie, no records indicate he had owned the land. While Ritchie did own other large parcels of land in Topeka, the first recorded owner of this five-acre cemetery land was Topeka Pioneer Orrin C. Nichols. Nichols officially obtained the land (160 acres) from the U.S. government in August 1860.

Those questions were enough for Jeff and Jan to start building a network of people who might be interested in or might want to help sort out the cemetery's history, parts of which have been written but not conclusively. —cont., p. 2➔

—cont. from p. 1➡ Jan bored into the cemetery’s origins, looking through property records ranging from the U.S. original government patents from Kansas territorial days clear through detailed neighborhood housing development surveys and plats for the perimeter of the cemetery in the 1960s.

Orrin C. Nichols in 1862 sold about



5 acres of his newly acquired land (the cemetery’s location) to three trustees of South Topeka Cemetery: Harvey D. Rice, William H. Jordan and Azel H. Slayton. All were early Topeka settlers and likely were well acquainted with each other and John Ritchie. The three men paid \$50 for the five acres, and their heirs would have rights to the property. There had already been two burials at South Topeka Cemetery. A neighbor of Orrin Nichols, Caroline Garrison, was buried there in November 1859, and her brother, Hinkley Garrison, the next month. The

grave for Caroline Garrison and other family members is still marked at the cemetery.

The deed recording Nichols’ sale to South Topeka Cemetery trustees Rice, Jordan and Slayton was not filed with the county (an action that would make the transaction official) until 1883.

Jeff, meanwhile, was tracking down who was laid to rest in the cemetery. Because of the lack of grave markers and formal records, verifying someone is at the cemetery is difficult. Find A Grave, an online database of cemetery records and grave photographs, listed 88 graves for the “Ritchie Cem-

etery.” Jeff found that most were added from funeral home records and from the few grave markers in the cemetery. He sought out others who had researched local cemetery and burial information—among them the Topeka Genealogical Society and individual researchers such as Cheryl White and Jill Herzog, both volunteers at the Kansas Historical Society. Jeff also turned to the current prize source for history researchers, newly digitized newspapers going back to the 1850s in Kansas. Jeff scoured the online database for obituaries

for people who might have been buried at the cemetery. There, he found additional names of people whose obituaries said they were interred at Ritchie Cemetery. Discovering all those “new” presumed burials sent Jeff deeper into the research.

A bird-lover and the creator of *Backyard Birds* YouTube channel, he finessed his **Newspapers.com** newspaper search queries for burials into multiple variations. His search terms included “Ritchie Cemetery” in Topeka and all kinds of creative spellings and different phrases, like Ritchy, Ritchey, Richie. Nine Topeka newspapers in the database carried information.



With his data expanding, Jeff started collecting his findings into Word and Excel documents detailing names, dates, funeral home, city clerk, and newspaper information for each suspected burial. When available, U.S. and Kansas census data, Missouri death certificates and military information were incorporated.

He’s also been adding to the online **Find A Grave** site, raising the number of people buried at Ritchie from 88 to possibly as many as 280. He has found that nearly everyone buried at Ritchie Cemetery is African American. Their stories are something Jeff is working to discover and ensure are not forgotten.

A 15-month-old child, George Manier, is the first known burial of an African American with a reference to Ritchie Cemetery, according to Topeka city clerk office records. That was in 1886. Scott Smith in 1888 is the first reference in a newspaper for a burial at Ritchie Cemetery.

And let’s get back to those special plants and trees in Ritchie Cemetery. Jeff suggests that such an array of native plants live there because the cemetery hasn’t been “developed” since the 1850s when Topeka was born. The central, grassy part of Ritchie Cemetery likely has been sprayed with herbicides, which would kill many native plants. But still, even with the minimal maintenance performed on the cemetery (much to the native plants’ advantage), like mowing, some prairie grasses and wildflowers survive there.

It’s also possible that the beautiful woodland ephemerals living in the edges of the cemetery would have been dormant when herbicides were applied, and thus survived, Jeff says. The invasive honeysuckle, however, looks like it has eliminated much of the plant cover deep in the woods.

As research continues, Jan and Jeff hope that readers might be able to help fill in the many blanks in the cemetery’s history. Here are some of the questions that need to be researched to understand the lovely, shaded burial grounds.

- The name: Why is it called “Ritchie” cemetery? Newspaper obituaries did not use the cemetery name “South Topeka Cemetery” for the burial ground, although Jeff has found at least two “South Topeka Cemetery” burials in Topeka city clerk re-

ords. Same question for “Howard Cemetery,” another name associated with the cemetery. Why?

- Other burial records: This project’s sources of information for burials include: **Find A Grave** posts (many of them made by **Cheryl White**); datasets created by the **Topeka Genealogical Society** and **Jill Herzog** (both of which are based upon **Topeka City Clerk Vital Records**, **Stonestreet Funeral Home** records, **Penwell Funeral Home** records, and obituaries); **Topeka newspaper** death and funeral notices from newspapers.com (through 1922); obituaries from the **Topeka and Shawnee County Library**; and **gravestone markers**, both existing and historical.

- Cemetery land and use records: Was the cemetery ever platted? Was there a formal organization or record-keeping system? The last recorded burial was in 1941.
- Besides the Garrisons, what other white pioneer family burials took place between 1859 and 1886?
- When and how did it become clear that the cemetery was available for burial of black and/or indigent Topekans, apparently without charge? How did that transpire?
- Descendants: Are there current Topeka area residents who are descendants of people buried at Ritchie who might have information? Descendants of the three cemetery trustees, Harvey D. Rice, William H. Jordan and Azel H. Slayton?
- Are there photographs of the cemetery from the 19th and 20th centuries?

To help the researchers communicate about the cemetery, Jeff created a Facebook group, **“Ritchie Cemetery Topeka.”** There, members can discuss not only the human history of the cemetery but also the natural history. A group has already begun reclaiming the woods from the invasive Amur honeysuckle that en-

—cont., p. 4➡



—cont. from p. 3→ gulfed the unmown portions of the cemetery as well as covered up grave markers. Plants, animals, birds, insects, and even mushrooms at the cemetery are being documented.

If you have any interest or information, join the Facebook group. Those without Facebook accounts can contact Jeff at jeff.hansen.sd@gmail.com or call 785.806.6917. 🐾

Comments by article author **Liz Leech** from material supplied by the group of researchers:

*I became interested in Jeff's and Jan's work when a descendant of **Nelson Holder Ritchie**, a man who had been enslaved in Missouri but escaped to Kansas, got in touch with me about my great-great-grandfather **John Ritchie** of Topeka. Nelson Holder Ritchie was born in Missouri in 1840, and appears in Kansas records in 1863, Topeka, as a Union soldier. Family researcher and descendant **Deena Porcaro Hill** says Nelson took Ritchie's name because of help he received from John Ritchie, the Topeka abolitionist, Union Army officer and Underground Railroad operator. Nelson in 1870 married **Mary Samantha Fullbright**, also from Missouri, in Topeka. Sadly, Mrs. Ritchie and the couple's baby boy, Eddie, both died in 1871, and the family believes the mother and child were likely buried at Ritchie cemetery. So far, no record of their burial has turned up. A year later, Nelson Holder Ritchie moved to Great Bend where he started a new family and operated success businesses for 20 years. His next move was to Utah, where he died in 1913.*

Here are two obituaries found about individuals confirmed buried at the Ritchie Cemetery:

The Western Index
Topeka, Kansas

07 Jul 1911, Fri • Page 2

SISTER CELIA PILLOW STEPS INTO THE OTHER ROOM. Sister Celia Pillow, one of the old members of Lane Chapel, passed to the great beyond, June 25th. When we came to Topeka nearly four years ago as pastor of Lane Chapel, Sister Pillow was one among the first to greet us. A large, healthy looking woman occupied a pew just in front of the pulpit that morning. A blessed smile covered her face during the service and it was a very strange thing to ever see her without that smile. When we were introduced to her she gave a cordial and hearty hand shake and remarked, I am a Pillow of the church, and indeed she. was not simply a Pillow, but a strong pillar. She was truly devoted to her church,



faithful and true. She was always willing to do what she could. Good cheer and sunshine characterized her labors and association with the church members. She was ill quite a while before her death, but was always cheerful and willing to bear her suffering; and even in the hour of death she was not dismayed. The end was peaceable. A husband, four children, two brothers and two sisters survive her. A large concourse of people attended her funeral, which was held from Lane Chapel. Her body was laid to rest in the Ritchie Cemetery. The Topeka State Journal

The Topeka Plaindealer
Topeka, Kansas

18 Aug 1905, Fri • Page 5

Mrs. John W. Patterson, who died at her home, 1220 Buchanan street, last Sunday morning, after a lingering illness of lung trouble, was born in Murray county, Tenn., and at the time of her death was fifty years of age. In 1872 she was married to Mr. J. W. Patterson, having been married over thirty-three years. They came to Kansas in 1879. Mrs. Patterson was a member of the M. E. church and always lived a strict consistent Christian life. She has worked in the church almost constantly since she was fifteen years of age. She was a member of the Benevolent lodge, having united with the order fifteen years ago, She leaves a mother, husband, five children, two sisters and three brothers, besides a host of friends to mourn her loss. Funeral services which were in charge of the Benevolent lodge, were held from the Shiloh Baptist church, conducted by Rev. Barton, who was assisted by Rev. D. Smith, of Asbury Chapel, North Topeka. Remains were interred at Richey's cemetery two miles south of town.

NOTE FROM OUR SCHS PRESIDENT

I hope everyone had a good summer, in spite of the heat, wet basements, etc. We ended the Spring with the highly successful Historic Homes Tour, with the available tickets selling out in less than 24 hours. The Shawnee County Historical Society had a peaceful summer except for lots of visitors at the Ritchie House.

We are planning another speakers' series this fall. It will be on Sunday afternoons in October but exact dates are still to be determined, as are the speakers. Board member **Roger Aeschliman** will be a feature speaker in his historical portrayal as **General George S. Patton, Jr.** On another Sunday, we will air the video of **Senator Kassebaum Baker's** reminiscences at the Landon/Franklin Mansion filmed during the Historic Homes Tours. *We will share specific details as they are finalized.*

With the exception of **Bob Totten**, our part time employee who always goes the extra mile, SCHS activities

are accomplished by volunteers—board members, tour guides, newsletter editor, and even yard cleanup to name a few. We are also dependent on our members who join annually and also on donations to support the work of the Society.

So—as you are planning your fall activities, put the speakers' series on the calendar, renew your membership when it is due, and plan to attend our annual meeting on December 8, 2019!

— **Pat Michaelis**



Ritchie House and Brown Historical Site Attract National Convention

The Shawnee County Historical Society recently scored huge good news for Topeka. It was announced in August a National Conference will be held in Topeka next April due in large part to the African American heritage sites available in downtown Topeka. The CEO of the **African American Travel** organization, Joe Cappuzzello, said the **Monroe School** at 1515 SE Monroe and the **Ritchie House** at 1116 SE Madison were deciding factors in holding the conference in Topeka next year.

The conference—expected to draw 250 travel planners from across the nation—will take place from **April 14-16** at the **Capitol Plaza Hotel**, 1717 S.W. Topeka Blvd.

“The entire **African American Travel Conference (AATC)** family and our members are looking forward to experiencing Topeka firsthand,” said **AATC President and CEO Joe Cappuzzello** in the release.

Cappuzzello said the Ritchie House was a deciding factor in the AATC's decision to come to Topeka. The presence of Monroe School, 1515 S.E. Monroe, which was the centerpiece of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that ended school segregation, and the Ritchie House at 1116 S.E. Madison, which was part of the Underground Railroad, are great draws for history tourists.

The AATC is an association of 2,500 travel planners serving the African American community, according to its website.

The “Travel Industry of America reports that the African American community travels twice as often on a group package tour as the population as a whole, and we at AATC act as the source between these travel planners and the travel industry,” the site said.

Visit Topeka, which promotes Topeka as a tourism destination, announced it has signed the contract arranging for the AATC to hold next year's conference in Topeka.

Cappuzzello said, “The Visit Topeka sales team and the Capitol Plaza Hotel impressed us during the site visit, along with their Midwest hospitality, convincing us that Topeka will step up to this opportunity to showcase all that it has to offer our members.”

Topekans should be proud of Friday's announcement—“another indicator our community is on the right path,” said Mike Bell, vice president of Visit Topeka, who worked with Cappuzzello on the bid.



Teachers Gather to learn more about Area Museums & Ritchie House

Area Teachers and Educators participated in a night out at the **Kansas Museum of History** August 1st. The night out event was sponsored by the **Topeka Alliance of Museum Educators**. Teachers from all the area schools were welcomed by over twenty museums and cultural venues in Topeka including the Shawnee County Historical Society. Teachers were informed about the opportunities to tour various historical landmarks including the **Ritchie House** located at 1116 SE Madison.

SCHS President **Pat Michealis**, **Bob Totten**, **Megan Rohleder** and **Nate McAlister** were on hand to answer questions about what the Ritchie House has meant to the growth of Topeka. Other organizations involved included the **Combat Air Museum**, **Evel Knievel Museum**, **The Great Overland Station**, **Mulvane Art Museum**, **Old Prairie Town** at Ward-Mead, **Topeka Zoo** among others. Teachers also enjoyed snacks, drinks and door prizes.



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



Option B: Send needed info via email
to shawneecountyhistory.org

I want to support:

- ☐ Heritage Education for kids \$ _____
- ☐ 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:

- ☐ General Membership \$35 \$ _____
- ☐ Patron Level Membership \$50 \$ _____
- ☐ Renovator Level Membership \$100 \$ _____
- ☐ Sustaining Level Membership \$150+ \$ _____

Total \$ _____

☐ Visa ☐ Mastercard ☐ Discover Credit

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Thanks go to 2019 Historic Homes Tour Underwriters:

Jan and Jack Brier
CoreFirst Bank & Trust
The Honorable Bob Dole
Kathy and Tuck Duncan
James Parrish of Parrish Hotels
John Pinegar of Pinegar, Smith & Associates
Michelle and John Peterson
Bonnie and Bob Totten
Joan and Bill Wagnon

Thank you also to the following:

Tuck and Kathy Duncan for supplying the wine
Mark Hobart, Hertz Rentals for the shuttles
Phil Anderson, Topeka Capital Journal for photographs of the homes used in the Souvenir Booklet



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Lighting Freedom's Pathway;
Building Heritage Culture

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Mark Your Calendars Society Events: Sept. - Dec. 2019:

- October 13** Videotape remarks from
Nancy Kassebaum-Baker's presentation
held this Spring at the Franklin Mansion
Cox Communications Center, 1118 SE Madison
- October 20** **Roger Aeschliman** as General George Patton
Cox Communications Center, 1118 SE Madison
- October 27** **Alf Landon's Remarks** in his later years
Cox Communications Center, 1118 SE Madison
- November 3** **To Be Determined**
Cox Communications Center, 1118 SE Madison
- December 8** **Annual Membership Meeting**
Location: to be determined

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*Sept.
2019*



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Noon