



Kansas City Black History

The African American story of history and culture in our community.



Acknowledgements

Now is the time for the annual Kansas City Black History project to rise to an auspicious moment in history.

This special 2020-21 edition marks 12 years of gathering the stories of the Black men and women who forever shaped our city and our nation.

We “chant their names,” writes Kansas City poet Glenn North within the pages that follow, “almost as if holy.” The poet is joined by other contemporary voices whose essays complement the project’s collection of more than 70 biographies.

In his introduction, Kansas City, Missouri, Mayor Quinton Lucas imagines a child like he once was, with a new library card, discovering these stories and growing up to understand “we are constantly creating new history.”

Black Archives of Mid-America Executive Director Carmaletta M. Williams calls the names of history in an essay praising a city that has flourished because of these Black Kansas Citians who “sat up, sat in, kicked down doors, and broke through glass ceilings.”

Negro Leagues Baseball Museum President Bob Kendrick writes of the league’s founders’ own Declaration of Independence that not only unleashed the daring business of baseball but the wider power of Black enterprise.

And Justice T. Horn, a young community leader and social justice activist, writes of how Kansas City’s socially active youth “are our father’s wildest dreams and must continue to lift others.”

There is no rest, he says. “We must be smarter, stronger, and better than ever.”

This publication chronicles African American educators, activists, entrepreneurs, entertainers, and athletes without whom there would be no Kansas City as we know it.

Since education has always been a primary goal of this work, historians and educators are crafting lesson plans to accompany the history as part of an interactive website, kblackhistory.org, that will expand on this project into 2021. Creation of the lesson plans is made possible through a Partner Discussion Grant from Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area.

This book is being published at a time when our community comes to grips with enduring patterns of racial injustice. And it coincides with the bicentennial of Missouri statehood in 1821 — an event that was itself, in part, a concession to the supreme racial injustice of slavery.

This project would not be possible without the collaboration of the Local Investment Commission, the Kansas City Public Library, and the Black Archives of Mid-America. This partnership gives thanks for the enthusiasm of the teachers, students, librarians, community organizations, and other readers who have shared these stories over the years.

We hope you enjoy this look back — and forward.



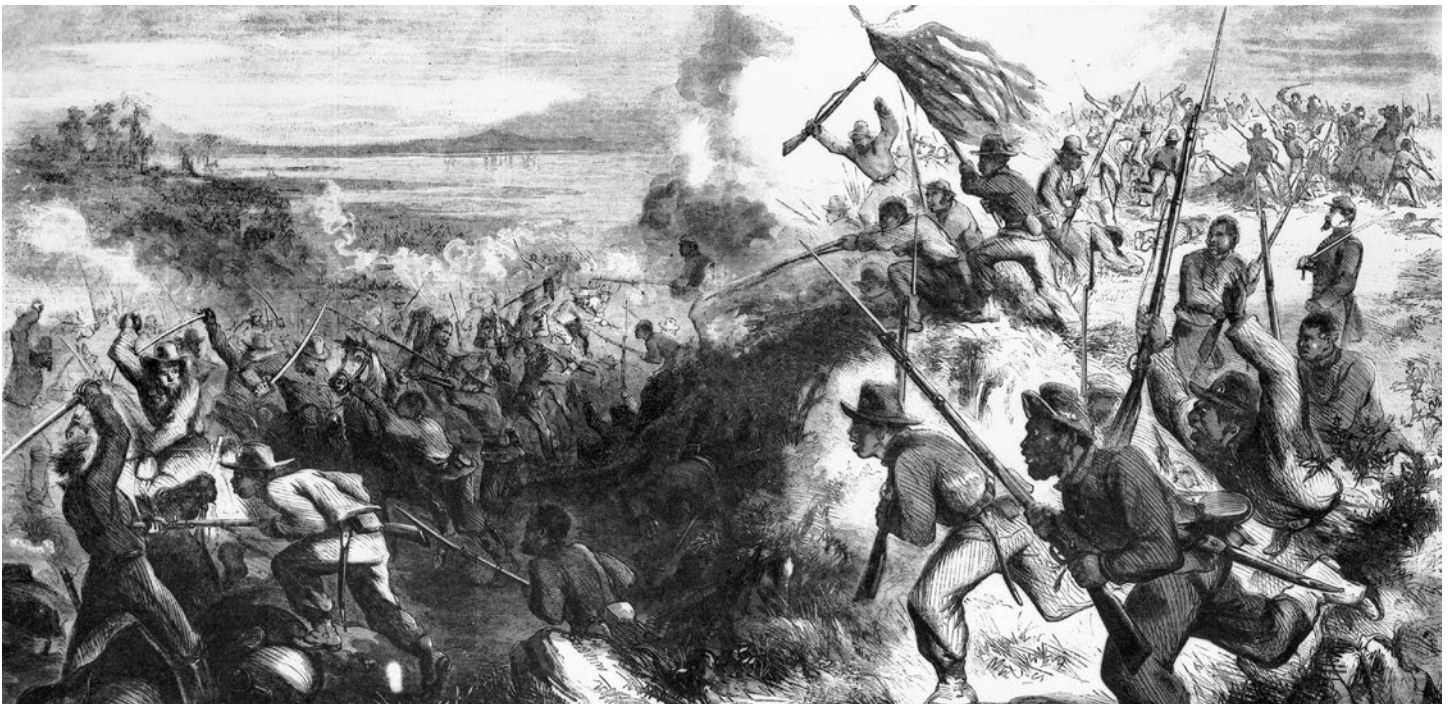
(Cover Image) Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. “Cornerstone laying, Y.M.C.A., Kansas City.” The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1914. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-08bb-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



Colored Battery at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas

Photo: Kansas Historical Society

This photograph shows the men of the Independent Battery, U.S. Colored Light Artillery, positioned in front of the guard house at Fort Leavenworth. The battery, organized in June 1864, was one of just a handful of Union units led by African American officers. Its commander, Captain H. Ford Douglas, worked tirelessly to better the conditions under which his men served. Of the 208 enlisted men in the battery, more than 160 were recruited from Leavenworth. Others came from Fort Scott, Kansas, and the Wyandotte and Quindaro communities in what is now Kansas City, Kansas. As the federal troops occupied the South, similar Black batteries were organized in Arkansas, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Virginia.



Battle of Island Mound

Photo: Kansas Historical Society

This illustration from the March 14, 1863, issue of Harper's Weekly magazine — titled "A Negro Regiment in Action" — depicts the Battle of Island Mound, Missouri, in October 1862. This series of skirmishes with Confederate guerrillas was unremarkable in terms of casualties (on the Union side only eight were killed and 11 wounded) but the incident marked the first time in the Civil War that African American soldiers engaged in combat. The bravery shown by the troops of the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry received national coverage in the newspapers of the day and undermined the widespread belief that Blacks were incapable of fighting. The success of the 1st Kansas Colored helped convince President Abraham Lincoln that the time was right to issue his Emancipation Proclamation.

Hiram Young

1812 – 1882

Hiram Young was born about 1812 in Tennessee. In 1847, Young obtained freedom and with his wife moved to Independence, Missouri. Taking advantage of his location near the Oregon and Santa Fe trails, he built wagons for western emigrants. By 1860, Young was turning out thousands of yokes and between 800 and 900 wagons a year. As Civil War tensions mounted along the Kansas-Missouri border, Young and his family fled to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1861. He returned to Independence at the war's end to find his business sacked and destroyed. Nevertheless, Young succeeded in building a school for African American children in Independence. Trying without success to recoup the losses he had suffered during the war, Young died in 1882. This purportedly is an image of Young and matches his general physical description. No other historic images are known to exist.

Photo: Jackson County Historical Society



William Messley

Unknown – 1916

First Sergeant William A. Messley (also known as Measley) of Company C, 62nd United States Colored Troops, posed for this portrait shortly after his enlistment in late 1863. The 62nd originated as the 1st Regiment Colored Infantry, Missouri Volunteers. Messley and his fellow troopers spent most of the war in Louisiana and Texas, guarding the Gulf Coast and preventing Southern efforts to export cotton, a cash crop on which the Confederacy relied for income. Their commander, Brig. Gen. William A. Pile, described the 62nd as “a well drilled and disciplined regiment and well fitted for field service”; however, Pile’s request that Black troops replace some of his ineffective white units was rejected by his superiors.

Photo: Wilson’s Creek National Battlefield, a unit of the National Park Service



William D. Matthews

1829 – 1906

Lt. William Dominick Matthews was an African American officer of the Independent Battery, U.S. Colored Light Artillery, at Fort Leavenworth. Prior to the Civil War, Matthews — a free Black man — operated a Leavenworth boarding house which became a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Assisted by Daniel R. Anthony (brother of women’s rights advocate Susan B. Anthony), Matthews helped many Missouri slaves escape to Kansas and other free states. With the outbreak of the war Matthews recruited his fellow African Americans into the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry and helped protect eastern Kansas from Gen. Sterling Price’s Confederate invasion of Missouri, which climaxed with the Battle of Westport in October 1864.

Photo: Kansas Historical Society





Photo: U.S. Army

Cathay Williams

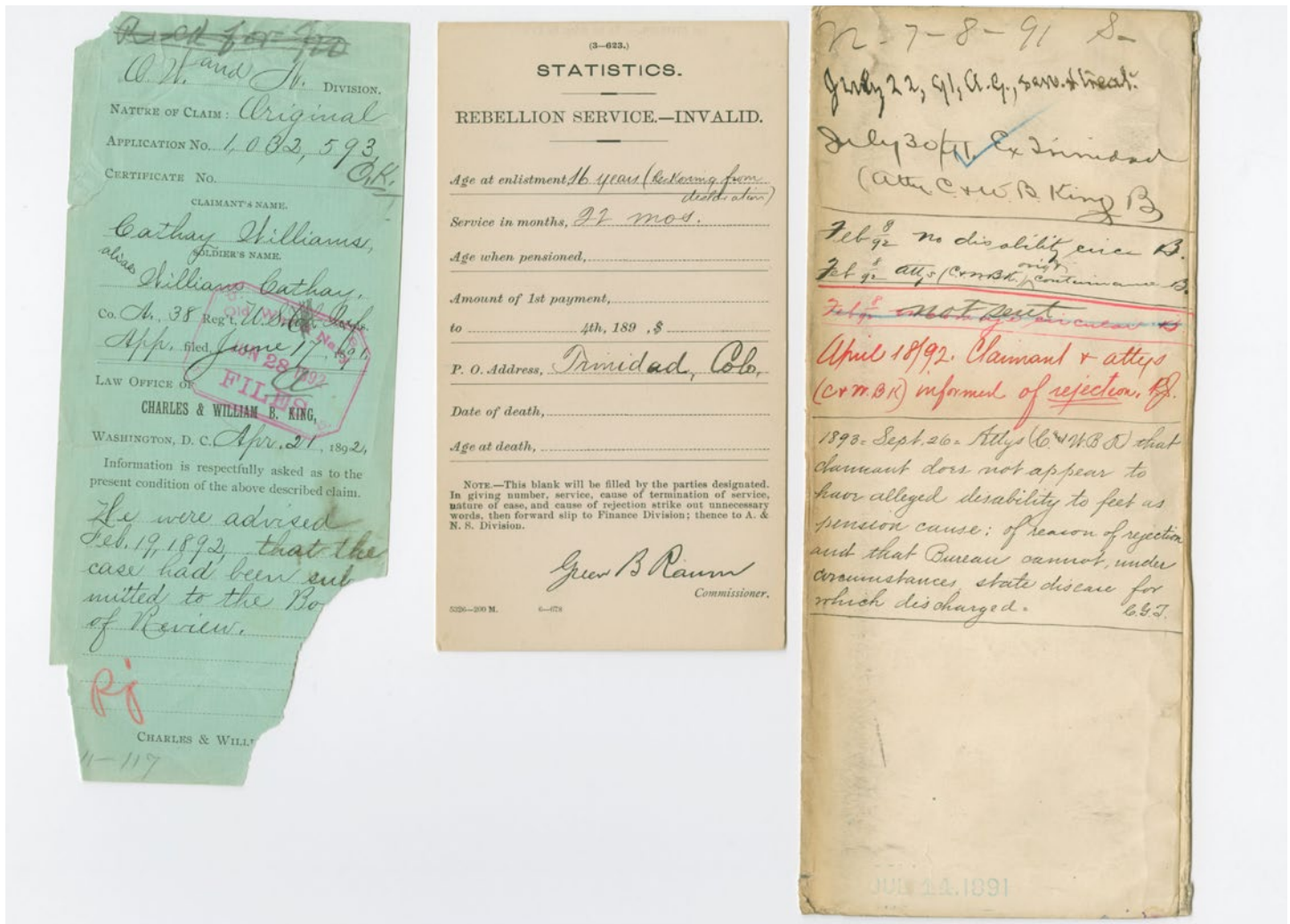
1844 – ca.1892

Cathay Williams was the first African American woman to enlist in the U.S. Army — in a time when women were prohibited from serving. She did it, remarkably, by posing as a man. Born into slavery in Independence, Missouri, Williams was relocated with her family to a farm outside Jefferson City while she was still a child and did domestic work there until the Civil War.

When Union forces took control of the capital city in 1861, area slaves were pressed into military service and Williams worked as an Army laundress and cook. She made her way after the war to St. Louis, had trouble finding employment, and in desperation disguised herself as a man and enlisted in the Army.

William Cathay, as she called herself, was assigned to the 38th Infantry Regiment, one of the African American divisions that became known as the Buffalo Soldiers. While never seeing combat, Williams served at Jefferson Barracks outside St. Louis and later at Fort Cummings and Fort Bayard in New Mexico Territory before being honorably discharged in 1868. She applied for a soldier's pension in 1892, but her application was denied and she died soon afterward.

A monument to her legacy as the only female Buffalo Soldier now stands in Leavenworth, Kansas.



(Above) Disapproved Pension Application File for Cathay Williams. Photo: The National Archives

Lafayette A. Tillman

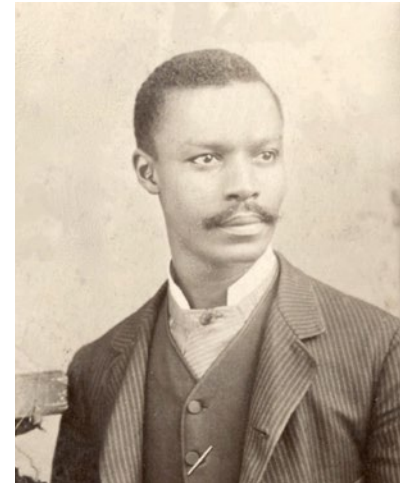
1858 – 1914

Lafayette Alonzo Tillman is remembered most for being one of Kansas City's first African American police officers. Born in Evansville, Indiana, Tillman attended Oberlin College in Ohio and Wayland Seminary in Washington D.C. He focused initially on developing his vocal talents, touring with several successful singing groups and once performing at the White House.

He settled in 1881 in Kansas City, where he opened a restaurant and worked as a barber, eventually opening his own shop at 12th Street and Grand Avenue. With his wife, Amy, he started a family at their home at 17th Street and Lydia Avenue. Tillman developed an interest in law and enrolled in the Kansas City Law School, but left his studies to join the U.S. Army at the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898. He advanced to the rank of first lieutenant before returning from the Philippines to Kansas City.

In recognition of his service, a group of prominent citizens secured a position for Tillman with the Kansas City Police Department, and he worked as a policeman until his death in 1914. He was accorded full military honors at his funeral.

Photo: Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library



Josephine Silone Yates

1859 – 1912

An inspiring teacher and passionate communicator, Josephine Silone Yates devoted her life to fighting racial prejudice. The first African American certified to teach in Rhode Island public schools, she later headed the natural sciences department at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri.

Moving to Kansas City in 1889 she became the first president of the Women's League of Kansas City and the second president of the National Association of Colored Women — positions that gave her a national forum from which to speak and write on the betterment of her people. She ended her career teaching at Lincoln High School in Kansas City.

Photo: Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-134336



Tom Bass

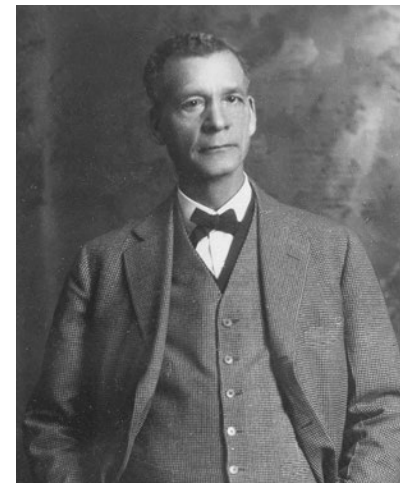
1859 – 1934

Tom Bass broke down color barriers as a world-class equestrian and trainer of show horses over a career that spanned half a century. Bass was born into slavery on a plantation in Boone County, Missouri. As a youngster, he showed natural talent for handling and riding horses. Around age 20, he moved to Mexico, Missouri, where he worked at a stable and established a reputation as an expert trainer. Known for his gentle methods, he invented the Bass bridle bit as a more humane device for leading horses.

Bass operated a stable in Kansas City in the mid-1890s and helped found the American Royal Horse Show in 1905. He was the first African American to ride in the competition. Bass trained horses and provided riding instruction for many of the city's prominent citizens. He would later travel the world performing and competing in shows.

During his career, Bass performed before five U.S. presidents and earned prizes at every horse show in the country with his prized mount Belle Beach, collecting more than 2,000 blue ribbons. He was inducted into the Hall of Famous Missourians in 1999.

Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri



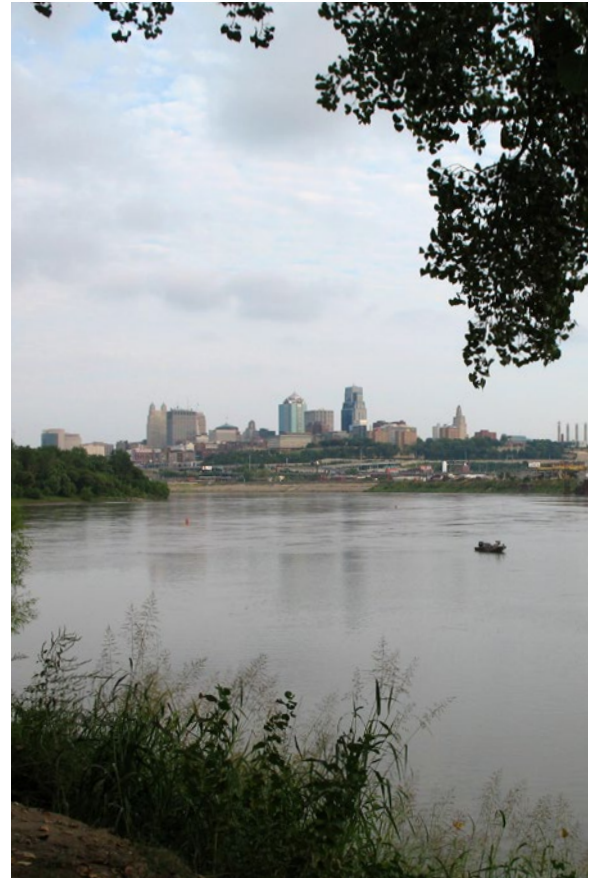
I Sing Their Names

Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will glorify the hunter. – African proverb

I know of a place on the confluence of the Missouri and Kansas Rivers — originally the home of the Missouri, the Kansa, and the Osage people. The place where York, strolling ahead of Lewis & Clark, set his left foot down, and the whole world tilted west. A place that called out to my grandfather, Basil North Sr., who, at sixteen, rode a mule 118 miles from Hartville, Missouri to Jefferson City to attend Lincoln University. He later saved up enough money to send for my grandmother. They both became educators then moved here to Kansas City. Perhaps that is my origin story. Maybe that's why I love this city more than it loves me. Still proud to say it's where I'm from because I know who came before me. My feet find comfort on their shoulders. Those whose light shines brightly beyond February right into eternity. And so, I sing of...

Langston and Parker,
Ms. Bluford and Mary Lou.
Old Buck, Leon Jordan,
Horace and Bruce.
Sarah Rector, Junius Groves,
Tom Bass, and Anna Jones.
Count Basie, Chester Franklin,
Bernard Powell and D. A. Holmes.

They are legion and I chant their names, almost as if holy, because you have to be careful about who you allow to tell your history. As Malcolm once said, folks that won't treat you right won't teach you right. We must tell our own stories. Reclaim our narrative. We must read, research, collect, interpret, curate, archive, document, observe, and report. There is a little brown girl in a classroom who has no idea how beautiful her afro puffs are, and she needs to know. There is a little brown boy who doesn't see himself reflected in a biased curriculum so he loses interest, gets labeled with a behavior disorder, drops out, runs across the right cop on the wrong day and becomes a headline and a hashtag. He needed to know. There are little white children in schools all over America being taught that the world revolves around them. Before they grow up to believe that it does, they need to know. I know of a place on the confluence of jazz, blues, baseball, and barbecue; home of countless Black lives that certainly mattered. I have no choice but to sing their names.



*(Above) Kansas City, Missouri skyline from Kaw Point
Photo: Americasroof, English Wikipedia*



Glenn North

Executive Director, Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Heritage Center & Poet Laureate of the 18th and Vine Historic Jazz District

Anna H. Jones

1855 – 1932

Anna H. Jones was born in Canada and graduated from Oberlin College, a private Ohio school noted for having been the first American institution of higher learning to regularly admit Black students.

She taught at Wilberforce University, a historically Black university in Ohio, before moving to Kansas City, Missouri, in 1892 to teach at Lincoln High School. She later became the first Black woman to serve as a school principal, assuming leadership of Douglass School in 1911.

Jones was a co-founder, with Josephine Silone Yates, of the Kansas City Colored Women's League, led fundraising for the YWCA, and served as president of the Missouri Association of Colored Women's Clubs from 1903-06. She retired from Lincoln High School in 1919 and moved to Monrovia, California.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America



*Principal Anna Jones (standing, left) leads a class at Douglass School in Kansas City, Missouri. Circa 1911.
Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America*

Education: The Key to Success

From their first steps onto Diasporic soil, Africans in America, now African Americans, have recognized the importance of obtaining an education. In most places in the United States, it was illegal to teach an enslaved person how to read or do arithmetic unless it benefitted the owner. With these skills, enslaved men (and some women, who learned clandestinely) could then help with market sales, measurements, and making goods. The number of Black people who were literate grew as they shared their knowledge with others in their community.

Newly freed people shared three primary goals, according to historical records: to own their own land, to raise their families independent of the interference of others, and to have their children become literate. Being able to read and write meant that they could no longer be fooled into contracts that bound them to former owners or put their lives, homes, or livelihoods at risk. The lives of the people in this book reflect those goals. Many community leaders featured here earned their renown by putting the needs of their communities before their own personal desires. Most of them were well educated.

Literacy was taught in churches, homes, on stoops, and in hush arbors. As the need for schools increased, Black people constructed places for formal learning. Elementary and secondary schools dotted the land and educated people across generations. Children, parents, and even grandparents learned to read. In this book the reader will find the names of many schools that were created to serve African Americans during a period when they were widely prohibited by law from attending schools that served white students. Many of the Kansas Citians featured here attended or taught at local all-Black high schools such as Lincoln or R. T. Coles (in Missouri) or Sumner (in Kansas).

Higher education became increasingly important as Black people sought work as teachers, doctors, or scientists, among other professions. After the Civil War, private universities were founded to serve the African American community, and in 1890 the Second Morrill Act opened federally funded land-grant universities to Black students. The Higher Education Act of 1965 defines Historically Black Colleges and Universities as “any historically black college or university established prior to 1964 whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans.” Famous men like Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois were in that first generation of Black people to attend HBCUs. Some of the men and women featured here studied at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, at Western University in Quindaro, Kansas, or at another HBCU.

HBCUs mentioned in this book are listed to the right. Many schools’ names have changed over the years; they are listed here as they are named today.

Education, in the Black community, has always been seen as the key to a successful life.

Carmaletta M. Williams, Ph.D.

Executive Director, The Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City



Lincoln University. Photo: Lincoln.edu



Lincoln High School, located at 11th and Campbell, ca. 1890. Native Sons of Kansas City Photograph Collection (K0528); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center - Kansas City.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities mentioned in this book

Alabama A&M University (Huntsville, Ala.)
 Benedict College (Columbia, S.C.)
 Bishop College (Marshall, Tex., closed 1988)
 Clark Atlanta University (Ga.)
 Edward Waters College (Jacksonville, Fla.)
 Fisk University (Nashville, Tenn.)
 Hampton University (Va.)
 Howard University (Washington, D.C.)
 Huston-Tillotson College (Austin, Texas)
 Lincoln University (Jefferson City, Mo.)
 Lincoln University (Chester County, Penn.)
 Meharry Medical College (Nashville, Tenn.)
 Tuskegee University (Ala.)
 University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff
 Western University (Quindaro, Kan., closed 1943)
 Wilberforce University (Ohio)
 Wiley College (Marshall, Texas)

R.T. Coles

1859 – 1930

Richard Thomas Coles was an educator who focused on teaching manual arts — practical, job-related skills — to his students. He was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1859 to parents who instilled the value of education. After high school, Coles enrolled in the Hampton Institute in Virginia, where he befriended future educator and civil rights activist Booker T. Washington. Hampton offered a manual arts curriculum, and both Coles and Washington were heavily influenced by what they learned there.

Coles arrived in Kansas City in 1880, found work as a teacher, and began offering a manual arts education to the city’s African American students when he opened his own school in 1886. The Kansas City School Board recognized its value and absorbed it in 1890, naming it the Garrison School.

Coles served as president of the African American division of the Missouri State Teachers Association for two years, as the editor of a weekly newspaper, and as a member of the Inter-Racial Committee of Twelve, an early civil rights advocacy group in Kansas City. He was principal of the Garrison School for more than 40 years, until his death in 1930. Six years later, the Kansas City School District named the R.T. Coles Vocational School in his honor.

Photo: Wisconsin Historical Society



Junius G. Groves

1859 – 1925

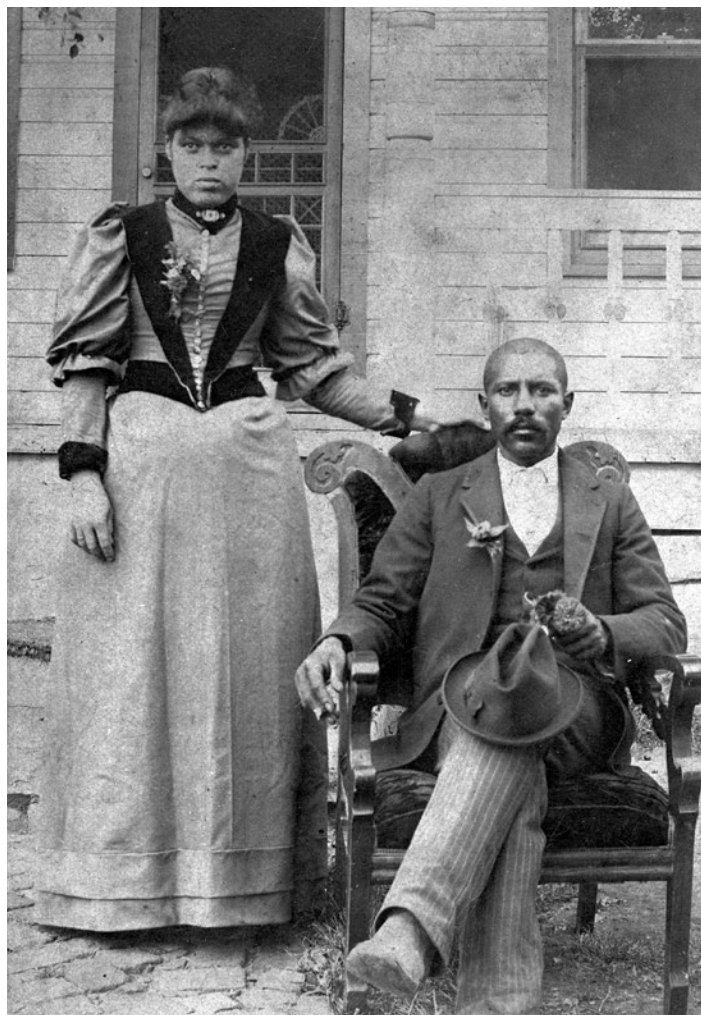
Farmer, landowner, and businessman Junius G. Groves was one of the wealthiest African Americans of the early 20th century. Born a slave in Green County, Kentucky, Groves was later liberated and joined other freedmen in the “Great Exodus” to Kansas in 1879, eventually finding work as a farmhand.

Impressed with his strong work ethic and production, Groves’ employer offered him nine acres of land to farm on shares. By 1884, he and his wife Matilda had saved enough to purchase 80 acres of land near Edwardsville, Kansas.

So successful was their venture that, just four years later, they had acquired a total of 2,000 acres and replaced their one-room shanty with a 22-room mansion. Groves made a name for himself as a potato grower, producing as many as 721,500 bushels in one year — far and away more than any other farmer — and earning the title of “Potato King of the World.”

He also operated a general store, maintained several orchards, and had investments in various mining and banking interests. Groves worked the farm until his death in 1925. He attributed his success to the endless hard work and devotion of his wife and 12 children.

Photo: The Kansas State Historical Society



Samuel W. Bacote

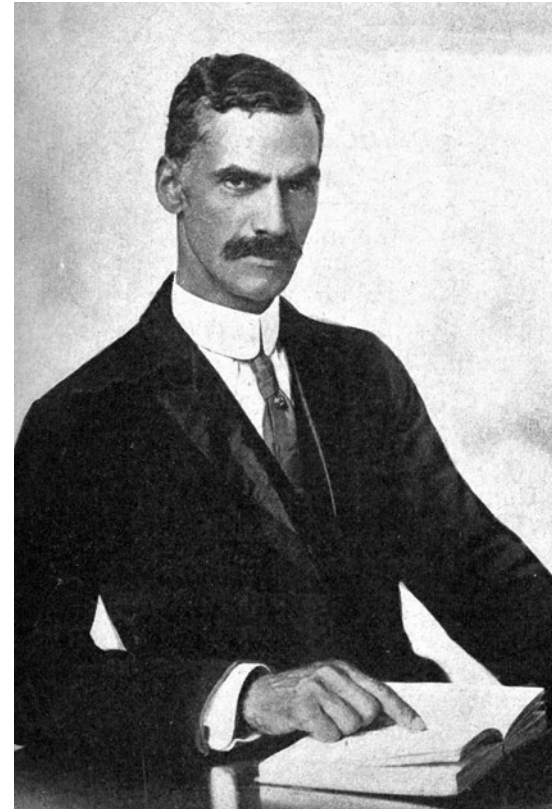
1866 – 1946

The son of former slaves, Samuel W. Bacote in 1895 became pastor of Second Baptist Church, one of Kansas City's oldest and largest African American congregations.

Bacote had degrees from Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, and the Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia; he received a doctorate in divinity from Kansas City University, Kansas City, Kansas.

Instrumental in establishing the Western Baptist Seminary in Kansas City, Bacote was considered the “dean of Baptist ministers in the Midwest.” He edited the book “Who’s Who Among the Colored Baptists of the United States” (1913) and served at his church until his death.

Photo: Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library



Thomas C. Unthank

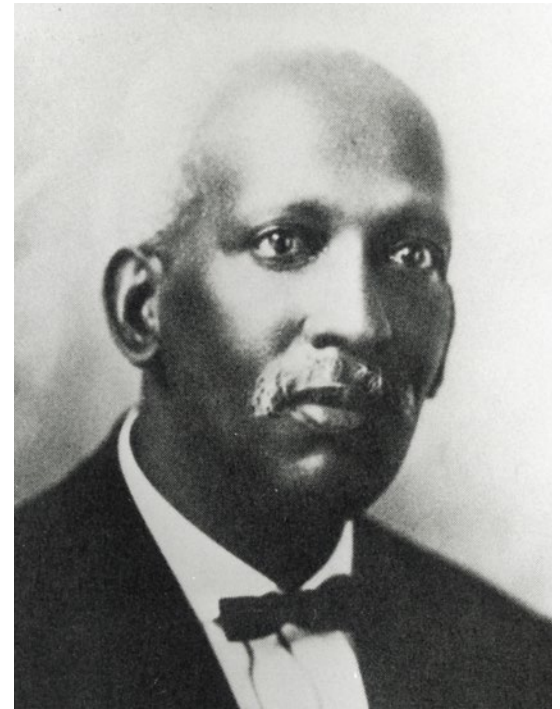
1866 – 1932

Thomas Unthank rose to prominence as a physician and the “father of Kansas City’s Negro hospitals.” As a youngster, the son of former slaves focused on his education and in 1894 gained admittance to the Howard University School of Medicine in Washington, D.C. Settling after graduation in Kansas City, Unthank joined other African American doctors in establishing Douglass Hospital, Lange Hospital, and the Jackson County Home for Aged Negroes.

When a serious flood hit the area in 1903 and an emergency hospital was set up in Convention Hall to help deal with the resulting medical disaster, Unthank was struck by the poor treatment of African Americans there and the need for a city hospital expressly to serve them. Five years later, as General Hospital was set to move into a new facility, he persuaded the city to allow African American patients to be treated in the building left behind.

He would twice serve as superintendent of General Hospital No. 2, as it came to be known. After decades of dedication to Kansas City’s medical community, Unthank died in 1932. A bust was placed in his honor in front of General Hospital No. 2, which was merged in 1957 with the all-white General Hospital No. 1.

Photo: James L. Soward Papers (K0610); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City



N. Clark Smith

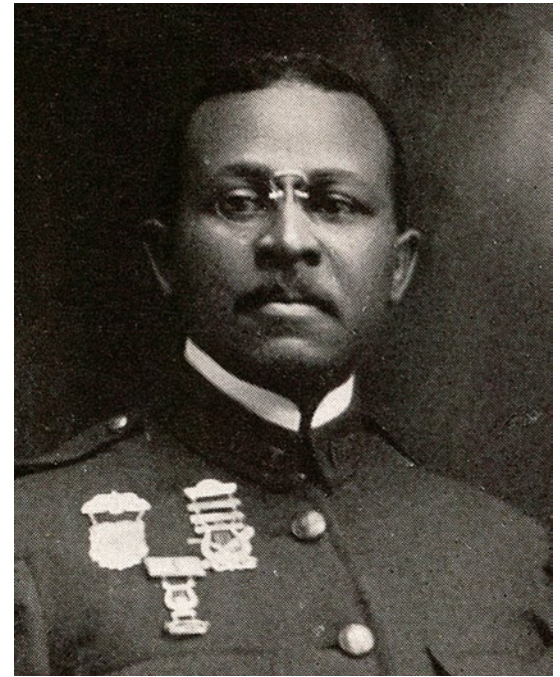
ca. 1866 – 1935

Maj. N. Clark Smith was a prominent musician, composer, and instructor and one of the most accomplished African American bandmasters of the early 20th century. Music and military discipline were instilled in the native Kansan at an early age. Born and raised in Leavenworth, he was greatly influenced by his father, a regimental trumpet player in the 24th Infantry. By the time he earned a degree in music arts from Chicago Musical College in 1905, Smith had organized and led numerous bands and garnered international acclaim as a bandmaster touring worldwide with a popular minstrel troupe.

After graduation, he served as music director at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and Western University in eastern Kansas and was bandmaster and military instructor at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, from 1916 to 1922. Although a stern taskmaster, Smith had a gift for cultivating an appreciation for music and developing the musical talents of his students. Several first-generation Kansas City jazz musicians, including Bennie Moten, Julia Lee, and Harlan Leonard, studied under him.

As a composer, Smith drew inspiration from Black folk and spiritual music and was awarded a Wanamaker Prize in 1930 for his Negro Folk Suite composition. He continued to compose and teach music until his death in 1935.

Photo: Special Collections and University Archives, University of Iowa



John Edward Perry

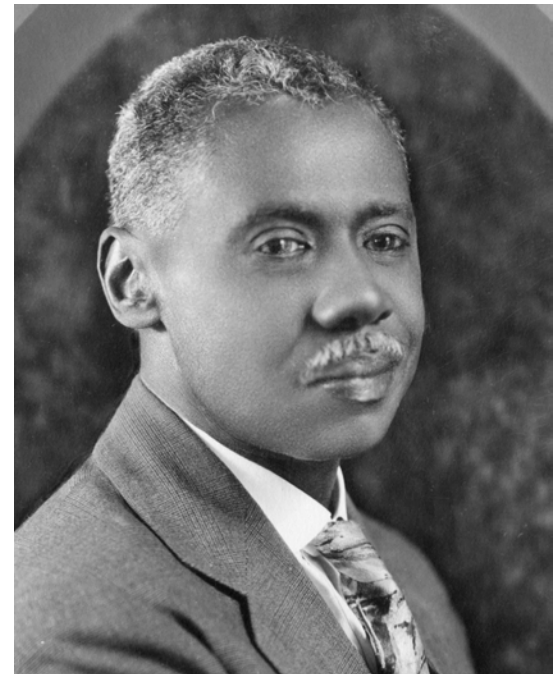
1870 – 1962

Dr. J. Edward Perry dedicated his adult life to providing quality health care to Kansas City's African American community and advancing opportunities for Black physicians and nurses. Perry was born in Clarksville, Texas, the son of former slaves. So intent were his parents on his receiving a formal education that his father walked four miles and cut 40 cords of wood per day to pay for his initial schooling. An advanced student, Perry attended Bishop College at age 15 and held a teaching position by age 21. In 1892 he enrolled in Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, and later completed his post-graduate studies in Chicago.

Perry opened an office in Kansas City in 1903. Recognizing the need for a professional hospital catering to African Americans, he campaigned with another Black physician, Thomas Unthank, to establish General Hospital No. 2 in 1908. Two years later he opened the Perry Sanitarium and Training School for Nurses. The institution was renamed Wheatley-Provident Hospital in 1917 and expanded to a larger facility at 18th Street and Forest Avenue.

Dr. Perry continued to practice medicine until his retirement in 1945. Through his vision, African Americans in Kansas City had better access to health care services and training.

Photo: Black Archives of Mid America



William T. Vernon

1871 – 1944

Bishop William T. Vernon served twice in leadership positions — including president — at Western University in Quindaro, Kansas, the first African American college founded west of the Mississippi River.

Born in Lebanon, Missouri, he went on to become valedictorian of his graduating class at Lincoln University, a historically Black university in Jefferson City, Missouri, in 1890. He later earned a degree in theology from Wilberforce University in Ohio. In 1896, Vernon was appointed president of Western University. Under his administration, Western developed its industrial training curriculum and acquired financial support from the state legislature.

Vernon left the school in 1906 to serve as register of the U.S. Treasury during Theodore Roosevelt's presidential administration. He was consecrated a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in 1920 and worked for four years in South Africa. After his return to the United States in 1924, he continued as a bishop in the Midwest. Vernon returned to Western University in 1933, serving as superintendent of its industrial department until 1938. Western University was severely affected by the Great Depression and was finally forced to close in 1943.

Photo: Library of Congress



Minnie Lee Crosthwaite

1872 – 1963

Crosthwaite was one of the first African American social workers in Kansas City and spent decades working to improve health care for the local Black community.

Though she had already taught public school, raised a family, and owned two businesses, in middle age Crosthwaite began working at Wheatley-Provident Hospital at 18th Street and Forest Avenue, established in 1910 specifically for African Americans. As president of the Hospital Auxiliary, Crosthwaite led an immensely successful annual fashion show that attracted thousands of people and raised money for the hospital.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America



Daniel Arthur Holmes

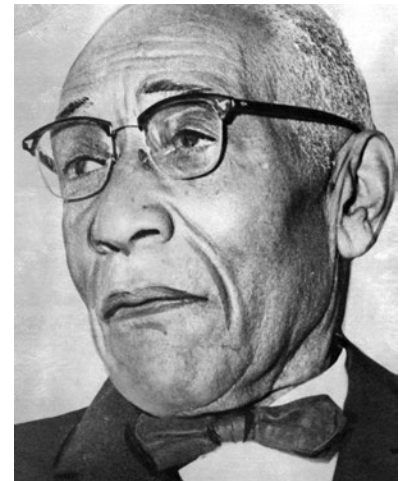
1876 – 1972

Holmes was the pastor at Paseo Baptist Church for 46 years and used his role in the community to advocate for better conditions for local African Americans.

Holmes's parents were former slaves, but he was able to earn degrees from three colleges and become one of the most respected leaders in Kansas City.

Holmes worked to integrate the University of Missouri-Columbia and won the battle to build a new Lincoln High School at 21st Street and Woodland Avenue.

Photo: The Kansas City Star/Times





Hugh O. Cook

1873 – 1949

Hugh O. Cook, one of the longest-serving principals of Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, was born in Washington, D.C., graduated from Cornell University, and taught at Normal A&M College in Huntsville, Alabama. He moved to Kansas City in 1901 to teach mathematics and psychology at Lincoln High and assumed leadership of the school in 1922.

Cook's tenure saw Lincoln High's move into its new Woodland Avenue facility, which is now on the National Register of Historic Places. Awarded the Distinguished Service Medal from the Missouri State Association of Negro Teachers in 1940, he also was instrumental in the founding of the Paseo YMCA and the Kansas City branch of the NAACP.

Cook joined the Army YMCA during World War I and was attached to the 371st Infantry Regiment, which provided the "comforts of home" to Black troops. He and his wife had two children and became foster parents to dozens of others without homes of their own. Following Cook's retirement in 1944, he lived out the remainder of his life with his wife in Los Angeles, California.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America



Cook with the Lincoln High School football team.

Ida M. Bowman Becks

1880 – 1953

As a renowned lecturer, clubwoman, and suffragist, Ida Bowman Becks led the local African American community in the pursuit of equality. Becks was born in Armstrong, Missouri, and showed promise as a student at Lincoln School, where she graduated as class valedictorian in 1899.

She then attended the Chicago School of Elocution, using that training to gain national attention as a public speaker. In 1908, she moved to Kansas City and worked as a field representative for the Florence Crittenton Home and the Foreign Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention. Becks became active in several charities and women's clubs, and she was instrumental in the establishment of the Yates YWCA and the Kansas City Urban League.

Her speeches in favor of women's suffrage, given at numerous churches and clubs, were praised for their eloquence. Audience members described Becks as fearless and persuasive, and her participation in public debates furthered her oratorical reputation. She went on to become a delegate to the 1921 NAACP convention in Detroit, a board member of Wheatley-Provident Hospital, and organizer and chair of the Kansas City chapter of the Negro Women's National Republican League.



John A. Hodge

1882 – 1969

John A. Hodge, the longest-serving principal of Sumner High School in Kansas City, Kansas, was born in Shelbyville, Indiana, and received bachelor's and master's degrees in physics from Indiana University. He came to Kansas City, Kansas, in 1910 to accept a teaching position at Sumner High and became principal in 1916. During his tenure, the school established a teacher training program and a junior college.

He also oversaw construction of a new school building. Hodge's community activities spanned both sides of the state line as he served as president of the Kansas City, Kansas, branch of the NAACP, secretary of the Committee of Management of the Paseo YMCA, and secretary of the First Baptist Church building fund committee.

At the time of his retirement in 1951, *The Kansas City Call* noted, "In a humanitarian way the educator has purchased books, clothing and food for students from his personal funds. One Sumner student, a promising violinist, studied in Russia because of the school principal's holding of a benefit concert in his behalf."

A former president of the Sumner High School Alumni Association once observed that Hodge "believed in the capability of all Black youth. He did not want them to think of themselves as inadequate, and he did everything in his power to see to it that his students were successful."

Photo: Dorothy Hodge Johnson Collection, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries



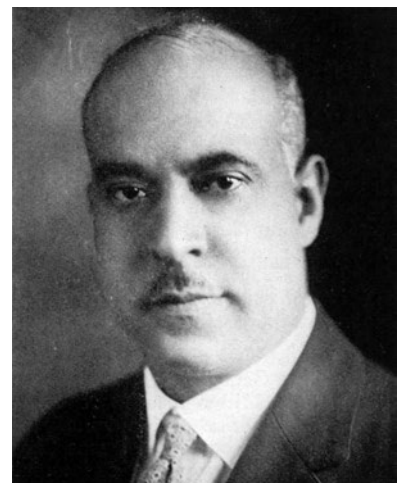
William J. Thompkins

1884 – 1944

Physician, hospital administrator, newspaper publisher, and civil servant William J. Thompkins helped found General Hospital No. 2 in Kansas City, the first U.S. hospital staffed entirely by African Americans. Thompkins's efforts to improve health and housing for African Americans in Kansas City were adopted as a national model by President Herbert Hoover.

He later turned to partisan politics, founding a Democratic newspaper for the Black community and serving as president of the National Colored Democratic Association. Thompkins was appointed recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia by President Franklin Roosevelt, a job he held until his death.

Photo: Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library

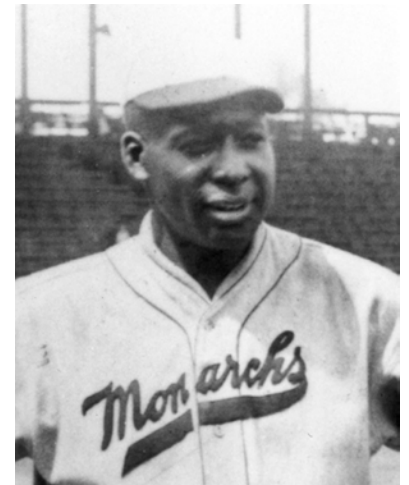


Charles Wilber “Bullet” Rogan

1889 – 1967

Charles Wilber “Bullet” Rogan was one of the greatest players in the history of the Negro Baseball Leagues, a multifaceted star who earned enshrinement in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Born in Oklahoma City, he moved as boy with his family to Kansas City, Kansas.

Rogan attended Sumner High School and played on several local baseball teams before enlisting in the U.S. Army and serving in the Philippines. He was honorably discharged in 1914, reenlisted, and was recruited to play for the all-Black 25th Infantry’s powerhouse Wreckers baseball team. Among those he impressed was future New York Yankees manager Casey Stengel, a fellow Kansas Citian who’d played against Rogan and recommended him to the owner of the Kansas City Monarchs of the new Negro National League.



Dominant as both a pitcher and hitter, Rogan helped the team win three consecutive league championships (1923-25) and a Negro League World Series title in 1924. He later managed the Monarchs — while continuing to play — and worked as an umpire in the Negro American League. Rogan died in Kansas City in 1967 and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1998.

Photo: National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum

Wayne Miner

ca. 1890 – 1918

The brief yet distinguished life of Wayne Miner was defined by sacrifice and valor. The son of former slaves, Miner was born in 1890 in Henry County, Missouri.

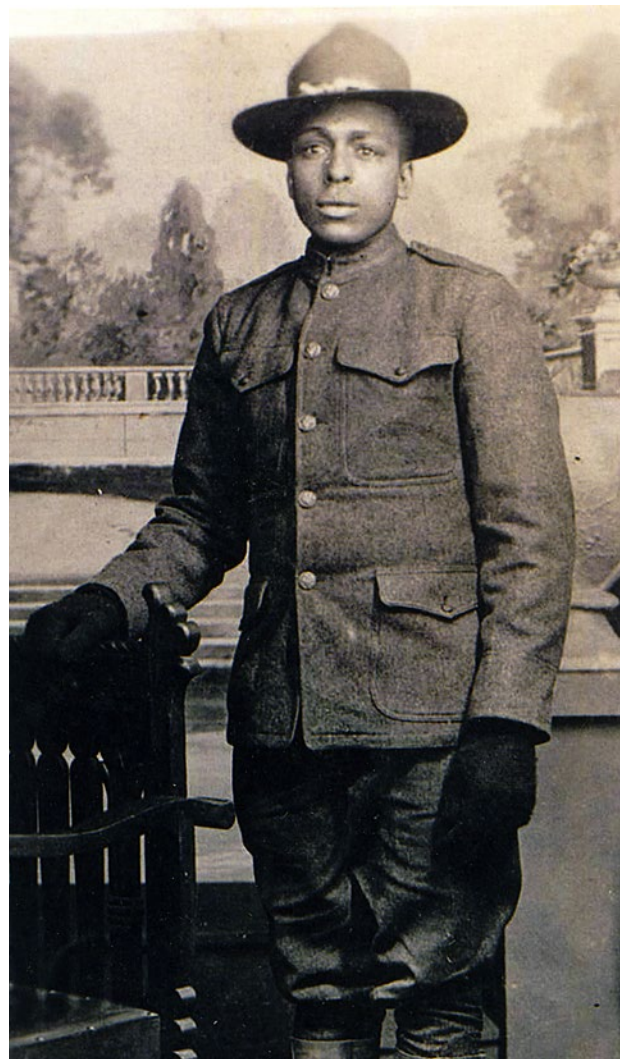
He later moved to Appanoose County, Iowa, and was working as a coal miner in 1917 when called to serve in the World War I. He was part of the 92nd Division, an African American fighting force nicknamed the “Buffalo Soldiers,” when it deployed to France in August 1918.

During the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the last major engagement of World War I, Miner volunteered to deliver ammunition to an outpost when no others would step forward.

Private Miner was killed in action on November 11, 1918, just a few hours before the signing of the armistice that ended the war. The following year, the American Legion Wayne Miner Post 149 was formed in honor of the fallen soldier.

The Wayne Miner Court housing development and Wayne Miner Health Center were also named for him. Miner is recognized as a hero and one of the last Americans to die in World War I. He is buried in St. Mihiel American Cemetery in Thiaucourt, France.

Photo: Iowa State Historical Society



This Is Where We Live, Grow, and Flourish

In this book, we celebrate those African Americans on whose shoulders we stand.

We must remember. Our entire community's identity is built on a foundation laid by the people whose lives foreshadowed our realities. We are who we are because they lived. Every business venture, social commitment, and artistic creation that we make today is a learned response and adaptation of our past. Focusing on our personal ancestors is important, but also, we must rip off the blinders, and expand our vision to clearly see the totality of our lives. We must honor and acknowledge our broader community. Horace Peterson III, named "The Keeper" by artist Charles Bibb, gave us the great gift of a place and means to capture the memories of our past, our people, and our culture when he established The Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City.

The stories of my great-grandfather Frank James Taylor and his wife Marie Jane Wilson, a product of the Exoduster Movement of Black people seeking new lives and a new freedom in Kansas, are deeply ingrained in my self-identity. They moved to Kansas City, Missouri, settled in Mozier Place/Dunbar Park, aka The Old 54th Street Neighborhood, in a space filled with Blackness: the churches, schools, and social clubs. Offspring of neighbors like the Shelbys, Isaiahs, Hollands and others continue to make deep inroads in creating the culture of Black Kansas City. Marie's mother, my great-great-grandmother Pinkie Wilson, settled in the Leeds District, where Alvin Brooks, the Blands, and other Black folks planted their roots. These were not isolated communities. Their stories are not unique. Entire communities of Black families came together in different spaces of this town to create the flourishing culture of Kansas City.

Black Kansas Citians sat up, sat in, kicked down doors, and broke through glass ceilings as they insisted on obtaining civil and human rights, effective educations for their children, equitable health care, and fire and police protection. Golf courses and lunch counters were desegregated in Kansas City long before the modern Civil Rights Era opened the doors of public accommodation laws. Hospitals populated with Black doctors and nurses provided effective yet segregated health care for Black patients. Black parents reinforced the educational system with their presence, books, and materials so their children could learn the same information as other children.

There is a long list of Kansas Citians — Rosie Mason, Carolyn Mitchell, Gertrude Keith, Mamie Hughes, Corinthian Clay Nutter, Blanche Waters Blue, and Mary Groves Bland, among so many other Black women — who, even in the midst of danger, would not give up the fight for social justice. So many Black men, like Dr. Bruce McDonald, Bruce R. Watkins, Leon Jordan, Jerry B. Waters, Henry Warren Sewing, and John "Buck" O'Neil, stood strong in the trenches of racial inequity and changed Black life and culture forever.

The roll is long, and it would take days, if not weeks, months, even years, to name all the people who made it possible for Black Kansas Citians to live, grow, and flourish in this space we call home.

We must always remember and honor them.

Carmaletta M. Williams, Ph.D.

Executive Director, The Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City



Frank James Taylor and Marie Jane Wilson

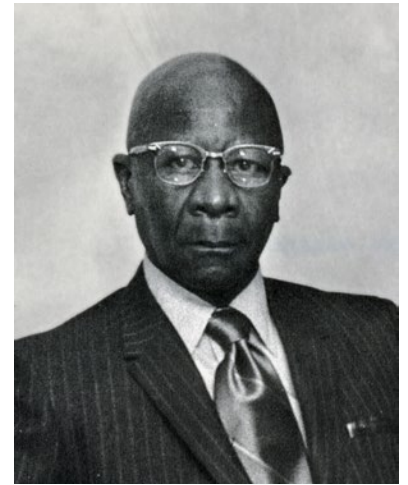
Henry Warren Sewing

1891 – 1980

Henry Warren Sewing founded the Douglass State Bank, the first bank owned and operated by African Americans in the Midwest. Sewing was born to sharecropper parents in Bremond, Texas, in 1891, graduated from Tillotson College in 1915, and taught at an elementary school in Austin. After military service in World War I, he came to Kansas City and found work in the meatpacking and railroad industries before becoming an instructor at Western University in Quindaro, Kansas.

Described as farsighted and determined, Sewing began a decades-long career in the insurance industry in 1922 as an immediately successful salesman for the Standard Life Insurance Company of Atlanta, Georgia. Prosperous years followed as the president and founder of his own Sentinel Loan and Investment Company. In 1947, he opened the Douglass State Bank at 1314 N. 5th Street, Kansas City, Kansas, to great ceremony. A motorized parade began at the segregated Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, and ended at Sumner High School, its Kansas counterpart. One dedication speaker remarked, “Douglass State is a continuation of the things Frederick Douglass fought for.” This so-called “Negro bank,” the product of Henry Sewing’s vision, provided home mortgages and small business loans, and brought economic development to its community until it closed in 1983.

Photo: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries



Earl Thomas

1897 – 1985

Thomas dedicated his life to education and public service. Born in Kansas City, Kansas, he graduated from Sumner High School and later earned B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Chicago and a doctorate in education from the University of Kansas. Thomas served as a teacher and administrator in the Kansas City (Missouri) school district for 35 years.

A proponent of vocational arts, he became the first principal of the R.T. Coles Junior and Vocational High School when it opened in 1936. Thomas later served as principal of Lincoln High School, stepping down in 1963 to run for city council. He won the third district seat, becoming the first African American to be elected councilman-at-large in the city’s history. After retiring from political life in 1971, Thomas remained active in community affairs. He served as president of the Kansas City Urban League, was a charter member of the Kansas City Human Rights Commission, and was an active member of St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church. A skilled craftsman who built his own home, Thomas also led efforts to construct affordable housing in the city’s urban core.

Photo: The Kansas City Star



Aaron Douglas

1898 – 1979

Known as the “Father of African American Arts,” Aaron Douglas was born in Topeka, Kansas, and developed an interest in drawing and painting at an early age. He studied at the University of Nebraska and in 1925 moved to New York City, settling in the African American neighborhood of Harlem. He almost immediately became involved in the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement of the 1920s that emphasized African American artists, writers, and performers. Douglas began creating magazine illustrations and developed a modernist style that incorporated African and Egyptian design elements. Among his most important early work were his murals at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library.

In 1939 he moved to Nashville, Tennessee, and founded the Art Department at Fisk University, teaching there for nearly 30 years. In his art Douglas explored and celebrated the lives and history of people of color. In doing so he powerfully depicted an emerging Black American individuality.

Photo: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division; Photographer: P. H. Polk



Melvin B. Tolson

1898 – 1966

Melvin B. Tolson became the first Poet Laureate of the Republic of Liberia. Born in Moberly, Missouri, Tolson spent his junior and senior years at Kansas City’s Lincoln High School. He later studied at Fisk University in Nashville, Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania, and Columbia University. From 1923-1947, Tolson taught English, directed plays, and coached the debate team at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas. In 1935, his team beat the defending national champions from the University of Southern California, a victory that became the basis for the 2008 Denzel Washington movie *The Great Debaters*.

In 1944, Tolson published his first collection of poetry, the well-received “Rendezvous with America.” He also wrote “A Gallery of Harlem Portraits,” “Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,” and “Harlem Gallery.”



Fannie L. Meek

ca.1898 – 1979

As the founder and operator of Mrs. Meek’s Mortuary — recognizable for its pink limousines and building facade — Fannie L. Meek was a trailblazer, one of the few women of her time to go into the funeral business.

Born in Georgia, Meek studied botany at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama under George Washington Carver, graduating in 1917. She was first an educator but found herself drawn to mortuary services after moving to Kansas City with her husband, Edward, in 1923. She studied at the Williams School of Embalming and Mortuary Science, opened her funeral home in 1937, and became a community pillar.

Meek served as a director of Wheatley-Provident Hospital, member of the board of governors of the Kansas City Urban League, and trustee of the Jamison CME Temple. From 1960 to 1972, she sponsored an integrated American Legion Junior Baseball League team, the Sparklers, in an attempt to integrate competition and increase young Black players’ odds of being seen by professional scouts. Also a member of the Second Ward Republican Club and Fifth Congressional District Federation of Women, Meek was elected to the Missouri State Republican Committee in 1967. She retired in 1973 and died in 1979 at age 81.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America



Andy Kirk

1898 – 1992

As a prominent big band leader, Andy Kirk popularized the Kansas City sound nationwide. Not a virtuoso musician or charismatic showman like his contemporaries Bennie Moten and Count Basie, the unassuming Kirk excelled at arranging music, organizing musicians, and conducting.

Growing up in Denver, he did not play an instrument until his late teens. He started his career in 1919, performing on alto saxophone and tuba in George Morrison's band, and by 1925 had moved on to Terrance Holder's band, the Dark Clouds of Joy. When Holder left four years later, the band members elected Kirk as their new leader. He renamed the group the Twelve Clouds of Joy and moved it to Kansas City, playing regular shows at the Pla-Mor Ballroom and Paseo Hall.

Under his leadership, the Clouds went on to tour the United States through the 1930s and 1940s. "For us," Kirk wrote, "Kansas City was like the hub of a wheel with spokes that extended in all directions." He dissolved the band in 1948 and went on to careers in real estate and as an administrator for musicians' unions in New York.

Photo: Kansas City Museum



Etta Moten Barnett

1901 – 2004

An actress and singer closely identified with the role of Bess in the opera *Porgy and Bess*, Etta Moten Barnett was born in Texas and studied music and drama at Western University in Kansas City, Kansas, and at the University of Kansas.

Moving to New York City she became a musical inspiration for Kansas City-born composer Virgil Thomson and the great George Gershwin. Though Gershwin wrote the role of Bess with her in mind, Moten Barnett did not sing the role until a revival of the opera in 1942. It became her signature role.

In 1933 Moten Barnett became the first African American star to perform at the White House. That year she appeared in two film musicals, "Flying Down to Rio" (singing "The Carioca") and "Gold Diggers of 1933" (singing "My Forgotten Man"). She retired from performing in 1952 and hosted a Chicago-based radio show.

She was appointed to represent the United States on cultural missions to 10 African nations. She was also active in the National Council of Negro Women, the Chicago Lyric Opera, and the Field Museum.

Photo: Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries



Roy Wilkins

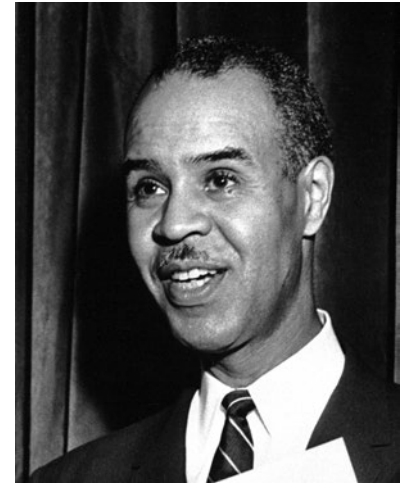
1901 – 1981

Roy Wilkins led the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1955 to 1977 and today is recognized as a giant of the civil rights struggle.

Born in St. Louis and raised in Minnesota, Wilkins in 1923 joined The Kansas City Call, where the young newsman chronicled racial injustice and championed civil rights. In 1931 he went to New York City, succeeding W.E.B. Du Bois as editor of the NAACP's magazine The Crisis.

Under his leadership the NAACP grew from 25,000 to more than 400,000 members, earning this "senior statesman" of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement the respect of millions.

Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Photographer: Cecil Layne



Rebecca L. Bloodworth

1901 – 1991

Sumner High School English teacher Rebecca L. Bloodworth was born in Bethpage, Tennessee, received her bachelor's degree from Atlanta University, and earned a master's in English from Columbia University.

She started her career in Kansas City, Kansas, teaching at Northeast Junior High School before joining the faculty of Sumner High School. In 1965, this respected educator was named a Kansas Master Teacher of the Year by Kansas State Teachers College (now Emporia State University).

Upon her retirement, the students of Sumner High School dedicated the 1966 yearbook to Bloodworth, writing that she had "proven to be much more than just a teacher, but a dear friend and a person dedicated to the profession of educating young people. ... She has enriched our lives and elevated our thoughts to higher ideas." Bloodworth lived out her last years in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Photo: Sumner High School Alumni Collection, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries



Langston Hughes

1902 – 1967

A leader of the Harlem Renaissance, James Mercer Langston Hughes was a writer and social activist who developed a new literary art form called jazz poetry.

Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri. After the breakup of his parents' marriage, young Langston was raised by his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. An unhappy, lonely child, he became obsessed with books, "where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas."

He began writing poetry in high school and attended Columbia University for one year. Though earning good grades, he dropped out because of racial prejudice and his growing interest in the nearby Black neighborhood of Harlem. He would live and work there for most of his life.

Through his writing Hughes embraced and depicted the real lives of working class African Americans and their struggles in modern America. He published 16 collections of poetry, a dozen plays, eight books for children, and 11 novels and collections of short stories. His two volumes of autobiography were titled "The Big Sea" and "I Wonder as I Wander."

Photo: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, NYWT&S Collection



Julia Lee

1902 – 1958

Born in Boonville, Missouri, and raised in Kansas City, Julia Lee was a singer and pianist whose work incorporated both blues and jazz.

She began her musical career in the early 1920s, playing piano and singing with the band led by her brother, George Lee. She launched a solo career in 1935 and secured a recording contract with Capitol Records in 1944. Lee was famous for her “dirty blues,” double entendre numbers she described as “songs my mother taught me not to sing.”

Among her hits were “Gotta Gimme Watcha Got,” “Snatch and Grab It,” “King Size Papa,” “I Didn’t Like It the First Time,” and “My Man Stands Out.” Most of these records were by “Julia Lee and Her Boy Friends,” an integrated group that often included pianist Jay McShann, saxophonist Benny Carter, vibraphonist Red Norvo, and cornettist Red Nichols.

Although her recording career slowed after 1949, she continued to perform regularly in the Kansas City area and on tours. She was married to Frank Duncan, the catcher/manager of the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro Leagues.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City



Leon Jordan

1905 – 1970

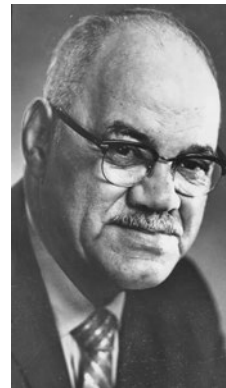
Orchid Jordan

1910 – 1995

The Jordans worked throughout their careers to expand the influence of African American voters and to increase the number of Black candidates for political office. Leon Jordan served the Kansas City Police Department for 16 years, and in 1947 left for Liberia, where he organized a national police force.

In 1962, Leon Jordan co-founded Freedom Inc., a political club that championed Black participation in local politics. He was elected to three terms in the Missouri House of Representatives, an office Orchid Jordan filled after her husband was killed in 1970.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City



Leon Jordan



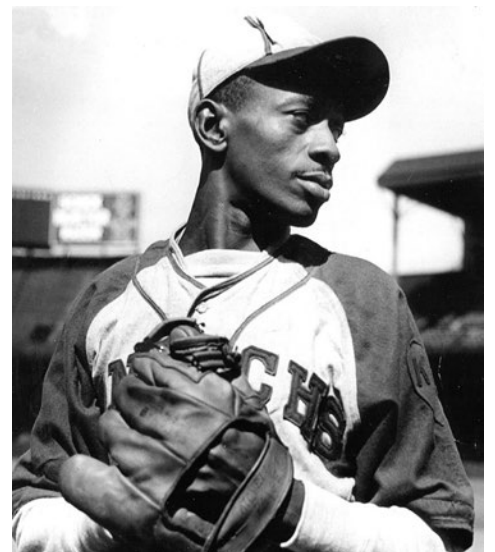
Orchid Jordan

Leroy Robert “Satchel” Paige ca.1906 – 1982

Legendary for his play and his personality, Leroy Robert “Satchel” Paige entered the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1971, the first Negro Leagues player so honored.

Born in Mobile, Alabama, about 1906, his nickname sprang from his job carrying suitcases at the train station. But it was his pitching that was the stuff of legend. He began his career in segregated baseball in 1926, eventually settling in with the Kansas City Monarchs.

In 1948 Paige signed with the Cleveland Indians, the oldest rookie ever in the majors. He played into his sixties and died in Kansas City in 1982.



William “Count” Basie 1904 – 1984

The musician most closely associated with Kansas City jazz, pianist and bandleader William Basie was born in New Jersey and came to Kansas City in the late 1920s. He joined Walter Page’s Blue Devils in 1928 and a year later was lured away to the Bennie Moten Orchestra.

As part of that band’s rhythm section, Basie was instrumental in the development of the swinging Kansas City style. After Moten’s death in 1935, Basie took over the group (now called the Barons of Rhythm), playing in local clubs and on area radio stations, and winning a recording contract with Decca Records.

Renamed the Count Basie Orchestra, the 13-piece ensemble became an international hit with records like “One O’Clock Jump,” “Jumpin’ at the Woodside,” “April in Paris,” and “Taxi War Dance.” Among the players who came through his band were saxophonists Lester Young and Herschel Evans, guitarist Freddie Green, trumpeters Buck Clayton and Harry “Sweets” Edison, and singers Jimmy Rushing and Joe Williams.

Big bands fell out of fashion after World War II, but Basie was one of the few to keep a large ensemble touring until his death, leading a group for almost 50 years. He also recorded with popular singers like Frank Sinatra and released albums in which he played with small combos.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City



Girard T. Bryant 1905 – 1993

Longtime teacher and administrator Girard T. Bryant was the first African American to serve as president of Penn Valley Community College in Kansas City, Missouri. Born in St. Louis, he earned a bachelor’s degree in English and history from the University of Chicago in 1922 and a doctorate in education from St. Louis’ Washington University in 1963.

Bryant began his teaching career in 1926 at Western Baptist Bible College in Kansas City, Missouri, joined the faculty of Lincoln High School in 1930, and served in the Kansas City School District for more than 30 years. He later served as vice principal of Lincoln High School and dean of Lincoln Junior College and held administrative positions at Manual High School and Central High School before being appointed president of Penn Valley Community College in 1970.

Bryant further served the public through professional and community service, editing the Journal of the State Association of Negro Teachers, helping to found Fellowship House in 1945, and serving on the boards of the Paseo YMCA, Queen of the World Hospital, and the Urban League. A colleague once noted that Bryant believed “students are the most important part of a school and that empathy between students, teachers and administrators is what makes a school either good or bad.”

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America



Corinthian Clay Nutter

1906 – 2004

Corinthian Clay Nutter was a teacher who fought to expand educational opportunities for her students. She was born in Forney, Texas. Her family relocated frequently as her parents sought work, and Nutter had to drop out of school at age 14. She moved to Kansas City in 1922, managed to earn her high school degree in 1936, and went on to graduate from Western University. In 1938, she obtained her Kansas teaching license and took a position at Merriam's Walker Elementary School, a segregated institution that lacked indoor plumbing and other modern amenities.

When a new school opened in the city in 1947 and African American students were not permitted to attend, Nutter joined a boycott of the dilapidated school and organized a home school for children in the community. The aggrieved group sued and won a case, *Webb v. School District No. 90*, that reached the Kansas Supreme Court and opened the doors of the new school to African Americans. Nutter continued her own education and advanced her career, eventually becoming the principal of Westview Elementary School in Olathe, Kansas. She retired in 1972, and is remembered for her role in school desegregation.

Photo: Johnson County Museum



Hazel Browne Williams

1907 – 1986

Hazel Browne Williams, the first full-time African American professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, exemplified academic excellence throughout her career as an educator. A graduate of Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, Williams studied English at the University of Kansas, where she overcame racism and indifference from professors and was elected to the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa academic honor society. After graduating in 1927, she earned two master's degrees — one in English from KU, the second in guidance counseling from Columbia University.

She began her career in education at Louisville Municipal College in 1932, teaching English and German. She went on to earn her Ph.D. from New York University, and worked as a Fulbright exchange teacher in Vienna, Austria. She would become best known for her tenure at UMKC, starting as associate professor of education in 1958 and rising two years later to full professor.

Upon retiring in 1976, Williams became the first African American awarded emeritus status by the school. She also was active in a number of organizations and institutions including the NAACP, YWCA, and Mattie Rhodes Center.



Mary Lou Williams

1910 – 1981

Among the great jazz musicians, Mary Lou Williams was a piano prodigy and became a professional performer while in her teens. With her husband John Williams she moved to Kansas City in the late 1920s and shattered barriers in the male-dominated jazz scene with her immense talents as a piano soloist, composer and arranger.

Leaving Kansas City in 1942, she formed her own small group, later joined Duke Ellington's band, retired briefly, but remained active into the 1970s. A section of 10th Street between The Paseo and Woodland is named "Mary Lou Williams Lane" in her honor.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City



Cloteele T. Raspberry

1910 – 1994

Born in Texas, Cloteele T. Raspberry moved to Kansas City at a young age and became a fashion designer and mentor to young women interested in the profession. Raspberry attended Wendell Phillips Elementary School and graduated in 1927 from Lincoln High, where she stood out in her sewing class. Two decades later earned an associate's degree from Isabelle Boldin's School of Fashion Design.

While doing sewing in her home, she taught night classes at the Brooklyn Center and local YWCA. Later a self-employed dress designer, Raspberry joined the National Association of Fashion and Accessory Designers. She traveled nationwide each year to showcase her work at designer shows in cities including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Chicago.

She was chosen as a NAFAD junior leader, guiding girls and young women ages 14-18 who were members of the national organization. They staged their own annual fashion show, with proceeds going toward their advanced training. Raspberry also was a 25-year member of Kansas City's Urban League Guild, and served as a Sunday school teacher for more than 35 years at Paseo Baptist Church. She died at age 83 in 1994, leaving her husband William, daughter Villa, and a Kansas City legacy of more than 70 years.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City



Leona Pouncey Thurman

1911 – 1985

Leona Pouncey Thurman was the first African American woman to practice law in Kansas City. Born in Russellville, Arkansas, Thurman became interested in the legal profession after moving to Kansas City in 1931 and working as secretary for attorney James D. Pouncey, whom she married in 1937. She earned a bachelor's degree from Lincoln University in 1947 and, following the death of her husband, enrolled at Howard University School of Law. She received her degree in 1949 and opened an office at 1505 East 18th Street, focusing on criminal law and divorce cases.

Thurman's distinguished legal career spanned 34 years. She was the first Black woman admitted to the Jackson County Bar, and also had a license to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. Thurman was an active member of the community, serving as a member of the League of Women Voters, YWCA, Women's Chamber of Commerce, and numerous other organizations. She was also involved in efforts to revitalize the 18th and Vine jazz district, purchasing and restoring properties in the area and building a community amphitheater and park.

Thurman inspired many other Black women to enter the legal profession and was dedicated to improving the east side community where she worked and lived.

Photo: The Kansas City Star



John Jordan “Buck” O’Neil

1911 – 2006

John Jordan O’Neil was born in Carrabelle, Florida. He was the second of three children born to John Sr., a sawmill worker, and Luella, a restaurant manager. The family moved to Sarasota in 1923. It was there that O’Neil received his first taste of professional baseball. As a 12-year-old, O’Neil began his semi-professional career as a member of Florida’s Sarasota Tigers. He took his nickname from Miami Giants semi-pro team co-owner Buck O’Neal.

Because of Jim Crow-era racism, O’Neil was not admitted to the high school in Sarasota. O’Neil was eventually able to obtain his high school diploma and earned a baseball and football scholarship to Edward Waters College in Jacksonville. He completed two years of college before leaving school to play baseball professionally in 1934.

In 1938, after four years of moving from team to team, O’Neil earned a spot as the first baseman for the Kansas City Monarchs, one of the elite teams of the Negro Leagues. From 1939 to 1942, Kansas City won four consecutive Negro American League pennants. O’Neil told *Sports Illustrated* about the glory years of the Monarchs: “We were like the New York Yankees. We had that winning tradition, and we were proud. We had a strict dress code — coat and tie, no baseball jackets. We stayed in the best hotels in the world. They just happened to be owned by Black people. We ate in the best restaurants in the world. They just happened to be run by Blacks.”

In 1944, with the United States deeply involved in World War II, O’Neil enlisted for a two-year stint with the U.S. Navy. Following the end of the war, O’Neil returned to the Monarchs in 1946. He won the batting title that year and also married Memphis school teacher Ora Lee Owen. In 1948, O’Neil was named player-manager of the Monarchs. He led Kansas City to league pennants in 1948, 1950, 1951, and 1953 and to two Negro World Series titles.

O’Neil left the Monarchs in 1956 to become a scout for the Chicago Cubs. He was named Major League Baseball’s first Black coach by the Cubs in 1962 and is credited with signing Hall of Famers Ernie Banks and Lou Brock to their first professional contracts. He remained with the Cubs until 1988, capping a 33-year career with the organization. He returned to Kansas City the following year and joined the Kansas City Royals as a scout.

O’Neil rose to national fame with his compelling account of the Negro Leagues as part of Ken Burns’ 1994 PBS documentary “Baseball.” But what seemed like an overnight success story was actually built on a lifetime of athletic accomplishments.

At age 94, O’Neil became the oldest man to play professional baseball when he stepped up to bat twice during the independent Northern League All-Star game. Shortly thereafter, O’Neil succumbed to fatigue. He never regained his strength and died in Kansas City on October 6, 2006.

Although he had fallen short in the National Baseball Hall of Fame vote in 2006, he was honored in 2007 with a new award named after him and posthumously given a Lifetime Achievement Award.

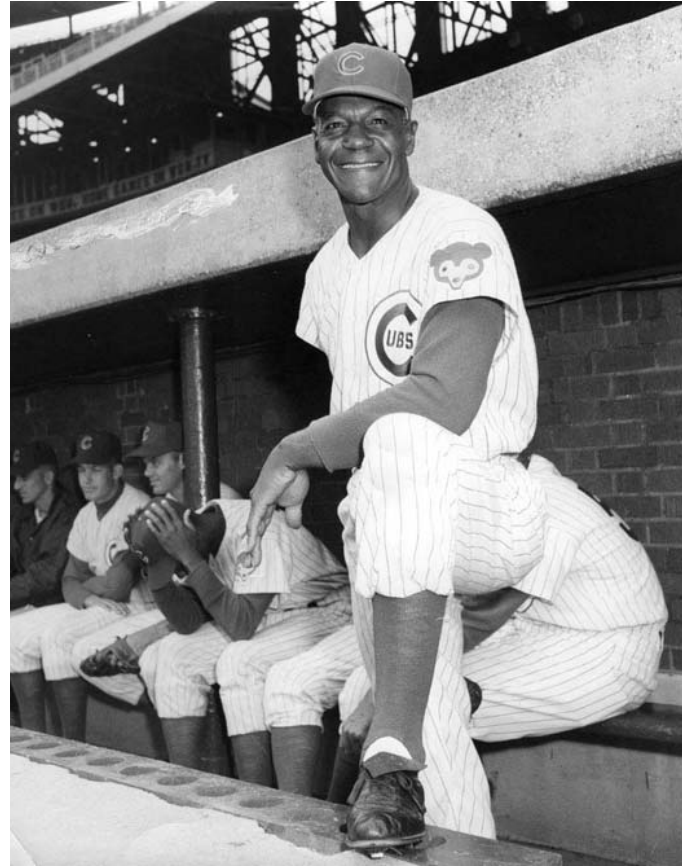


Photo: Chicago Tribune

Celebrating a Game-Changing Century

When I started at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum as a volunteer 27 years ago, I considered myself very much a baseball fan. But I would quickly discover that the four decades of baseball history the museum preserves and conveys — the four decades of American history it represents — was a chapter that I really did not know very much about.

I had no idea of the scope and magnitude of the history, both on and off the field, that the Negro Leagues represented. I fell in love with the athletes. I was awed by the power of their stories and their compassionate spirit. I was inspired, and remain so today, by how they spoke to our city and our country through experience and example. Their relevance is as enduring as that of the many other Black leaders and trailblazers on these pages.

What makes the story of the Negro Leagues so compelling, so inspirational, is the mindset of its players, coaches, and owners, which was, simply: Okay, you won't let me play with you, I'll just create a league of my own. If you think about it, that is the American way. While our country was trying to prevent them from sharing in the joys of the national pastime, the American spirit allowed them to persevere and prevail. That triumphant nature of their story is what grabs the minds, the hearts, and the imaginations of those who come to see us at the museum.

Many young visitors, based on their experiences, are quick to downplay history. They are quick to say: Well, that was then and this is now. But all of a sudden, “now” starts to look a lot like “then,” particularly as it relates to race relations and centuries-old inequities in our country.

What the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum does so beautifully is bridge that racial gap; it creates the wherewithal that visitors, and young people in particular, may draw from so they can understand the commonality we all share. I don't want the only images of me to be those that reflect Black people's experience of being downtrodden in this country — being sprayed with fire hoses, dogs being released on us, or the police brutality that manifests itself to this day. Our success stories are equally important, and they unite us. They help us understand that we Americans have far more in common than we do differences.



1953 Kansas City Monarchs vs. Indianapolis Clowns

It strikes me as something wonderful, that a baseball league that was born of segregation became a driving force for social change in this country; that a league born of exclusion would become one of this country's most inclusive entities. The Negro Leagues didn't care what color you were, and it didn't care what gender you were. What it cared about was: Could you play? Do you have something to offer? It opened its doors to players of all colors, and it opened its doors to women as players, as leaders, as executives. It was far ahead of society. As Buck O'Neil so eloquently said, the players of the Negro Leagues built the bridge that others crossed over.

We tend to celebrate the people who do the crossing over. But at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, and in this important publication, we tip our cap to all who've built bridges.

Bob Kendrick

President, Negro Leagues Baseball Museum

Lloyd Gaines

1911 – unknown

Sixteen years before the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* ended legal segregation in schools, Lloyd Gaines fought a court battle to attend the University of Missouri. Gaines was born in Oxford, Mississippi, but moved with his family to St. Louis at age 14. He was valedictorian of his high school class and graduated with a bachelor's degree in history from Lincoln University.

In 1935, Gaines applied for admission to the University of Missouri Law School but was denied because of his race. With the aid of the NAACP, he sued the university to admit him. After the county court and Missouri Supreme Court ruled in favor of the university, his case was brought before the U.S. Supreme Court. In a 6–2 decision, the court ruled that either Gaines be admitted or a separate law school for African Americans be established. Following the decision, Gaines traveled to Chicago and was staying at a fraternity house when, on March 19, 1939, he left to run an errand and was never heard from again. While Gaines never realized his dream of studying law at the University of Missouri, his case established the principle of “equality of education” and influenced other legislation leading up to school desegregation.

Photo: Associated Press



Lucile H. Bluford

1911 – 2003

Bluford served as editor of *The Kansas City Call* for nearly 50 years and played an important role in the major civil rights battles of the 20th century.

Her fight to enter the graduate program in journalism at the University of Missouri-Columbia in the 1930s and 1940s helped integrate higher education. Known as “Miss Bluford,” her editorials in *The Call* sharply criticized discrimination, mourned the loss of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., and supported the election of African American politicians.

Photo: Kansas Collection, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries



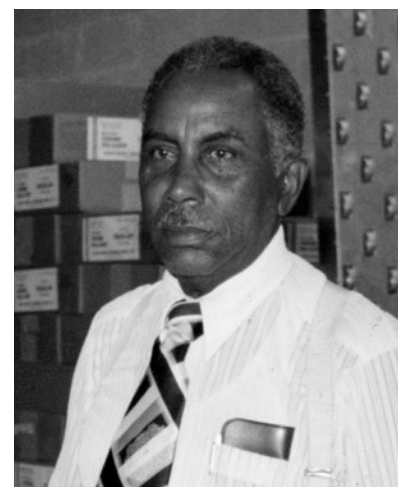
G. Lawrence Blankinship Sr.

1913 – 2005

One of Kansas City's best-known Black businessmen, G. Lawrence Blankinship Sr. was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, in 1913 and moved to Kansas City as a teenager. A graduate of Lincoln High School, he learned the pharmacy profession, managed the Crown Drug store at 18th and Vine, and in 1947 started his own business. The company became Blankinship Distributors Inc., a wholesale beauty products supplier ranked by *Black Enterprise* magazine as one of the nation's top 100 Black businesses in the 1980s.

Blankinship Distributors supplied hundreds of sales outlets, mainly drugstores, with hair care and cosmetic products developed for a burgeoning, often overlooked African American market. Blankinship's national reputation as a successful entrepreneur complemented his renown as a tireless community leader and advocate for Black economic development. With Bruce Watkins, whom he succeeded, he was among the first African Americans on the Kansas City Council. Blankinship also served on numerous influential boards, including the Douglass State Bank and the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, and was founding chairman of the Black Economic Union. Described as a soft-spoken leader, his even-handed style helped to bridge the racial divide during the city's troubled 1960s. He died in 2005 at the age of 92.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City



Gordon Parks

1912 – 2006

The son of a farmer in Fort Scott, Kansas, Gordon Parks defied racism and his own impoverished beginnings to become one of the world's great photographers, as well as an internationally recognized writer, composer, and filmmaker.

As a photographer Parks moved easily between fashion, portraiture, and gritty studies of African American life. In the 1940s he shot fashion layouts for *Vogue*; in 1948 he became the first Black staff member of *Life* magazine, where for 20 years he shot fashion, sports and entertainment celebrities, and studies of poverty and racial segregation.

In 1969 he adapted his autobiographical novel “The Learning Tree” into a film, becoming Hollywood’s first major Black director. Subsequent films included “Shaft” (1971), “The Super Cops” (1974), and “Leadbelly” (1976). He wrote a three-volume memoir, several books of poetry, and composed jazz tunes, a piano concerto, a symphony, and a ballet about Martin Luther King Jr.

The underlying theme of his work, Parks said, was freedom: “Not allowing anyone to set boundaries, cutting loose the imagination, and then making the new horizons.”

Photo: Untitled, 1940s, Photograph by Gordon Parks, Courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation



Andrew Carter

1919 – 1988

Mildred Carter

1913 – 2003

Andrew “Skip” Carter’s fascination with radio started early. Raised in Savannah, Georgia, he built his first radio set at age 14. He would become an industry pioneer, putting the first African American-owned station west of the Mississippi — Kansas City’s KPRS-AM, the forerunner of today’s Hot 103 Jamz — on the air in 1950.

It remains the longest continuously Black-owned station in the country, owing also to the work of Carter’s wife, Mildred, who suggested filing for an FM license that was granted in 1963. She then assumed chairmanship of the board upon Andrew’s death in 1988. Andrew, who served in the U.S. Army during World War II, studied at the RCA School of Electronics and New York University, but efforts to found his own station were thwarted by the era’s racial attitudes.

He vented his frustration in a letter to *Broadcast* magazine that was read by former Kansas Gov. Alf Landon, who hired him to run a station he owned in Leavenworth, Kansas. Carter and partner Edward Pate went on to launch KPRS, devoting its playlist to R&B and soul.

Carter and Pate were inducted into the National Radio Hall of Fame in 1995. Mildred’s honors include the Pioneer of Broadcasting Award from the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters.

Photos: Carter Broadcast Group



Andrew Carter



Mildred Carter

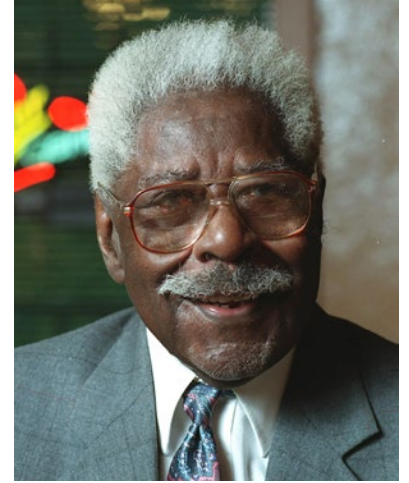
L.C. “Speedy” Huggins

1913 – 1999

Ironically nicknamed “Speedy” for his slow, soft-shoe dancing style, L. C. Huggins’ roots stretched back to the city’s Golden Age of Jazz. Born in Fort Smith, Arkansas, in 1913, Huggins grew up in Kansas City, Kansas. As a teen the self-taught tap dancer performed in the legendary 18th and Vine District.

In 1933 he was among the opening-night acts at the Cherry Blossom Club. After military service in World War II Huggins entertained throughout Europe; returning home he added singing and drumming to his repertoire.

Kansas City’s “King of Nightlife” was a fixture of the jazz scene until his death.



Gertrude Keith

1914 – 2009

Gertrude Keith worked for many years to ensure that Kansas City’s disadvantaged residents had access to safe and affordable housing. Raised by relatives after the deaths of her parents, she experienced segregation in her youth and, later in life, recalled witnessing a cross burned on a neighbor’s lawn. At a time when many young African Americans were unable to cover the distance to the only high school in the city open to them, Keith’s grandmother made education a priority and moved her family closer to Lincoln High School.

Keith graduated in 1930 and went on to study music at the University of Nebraska, where she met her husband, jazz musician Jimmy Keith. They started a family back in Kansas City, where Gertrude found work with the city housing department. She was appointed the first director of the Wayne Miner Courts housing development in 1960, advanced in her career over the years, and retired as an associate director of the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority.

Keith also was a dedicated community activist who worked for the creation of the Spirit of Freedom Fountain honoring the contributions of Kansas City’s African Americans. In 2003, the research library at the Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Heritage Center was named for her.

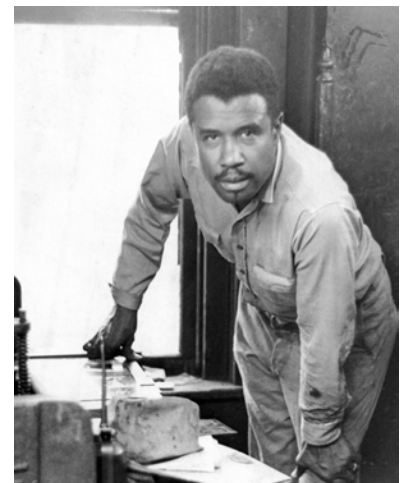


William L. Fambrough

1916 – 1983

For three decades, William Fambrough documented African American life in Kansas City through his photographs. Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, he moved with his family to Kansas City when he was a young boy. Fambrough showed an interest in photography at an early age and convinced his parents to buy him a Kodak Brownie camera. After graduating from Lincoln High School in 1935, he studied graphic arts at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, and then served in World War II with the 829th Aviation Engineers of the U.S. Army Air Force. After three years in the military, Fambrough completed his degree and resumed his passion for photography.

He worked for The Kansas City Call and as a freelance photographer, capturing images of the African American experience in Kansas City from the 1950s to the '70s. Many of his photographs also appeared — uncredited — in The Kansas City Star. Renowned for capturing his subject matter with a single snapshot, Fambrough earned the nickname “One Shot Fambrough.” Examples of his work are preserved in the collections of the Black Archives of Mid-America and State Historical Society of Missouri.





Herman Johnson

1916 – 2004

Dorothy Johnson

1916 – 2004

Herman and Dorothy Johnson achieved success in numerous endeavors while contributing to institutions and causes that strengthened the social and economic interests of the African American community. Herman Johnson, a member of the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II, was a graduate of Cornell University. An entrepreneur with interests in real estate appraisal, insurance, and other ventures, he also was president of the Kansas City branch of the NAACP and served in the Missouri Legislature.

Dorothy Johnson was the first Black woman member of Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Kansas, where she earned degrees in journalism and social work. A journalist with The Kansas City Call, she also held leadership positions with the Urban League of Kansas City. Both were among the co-founders of the Local Investment Commission.

Florynce R. Kennedy

1916 – 2000

Florynce Rae Kennedy was a civil rights attorney and feminist activist. Her controversial tactics and provocative tone drew criticism but also helped publicize national debates on abortion, racism in the media, women's equality, and consumer protection. Kennedy was one of the first African American women to graduate from Columbia Law School.

She represented activists such as H. Rap Brown and members of the Black Panthers as well as the estates of Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker against record companies that had withheld royalties. Kennedy was an integral part of the feminist movement beginning in the 1970s. She toured the country on the lecture circuit, often with friend and fellow activist Gloria Steinem, while continuing to lead protests including a rally outside the 1976 Democratic National Convention in New York.



Jay McShann

1916 – 2006

James Columbus "Jay" McShann was a prominent and influential jazz pianist and band leader. Growing up in Muskogee, Oklahoma, he defied his parents' disapproval of his musical inclinations and taught himself to play the piano. He stuck to his craft and began his professional career by the 1930s, touring with jazz groups in the South and Midwest. En route to Omaha, Nebraska, in 1936, McShann's bus stopped in Kansas City, where he found there was work for jazz musicians in the city's numerous nightclubs.

He decided to stay and eventually formed the Jay McShann Orchestra, a group that gave a young saxophonist named Charlie Parker his start. McShann helped develop what became known as the Kansas City sound, a jazz style heavily influenced by rhythm and blues and driven by catchy riffs. He continued to tour and record music, putting his career on hold when drafted into the U.S. Army during World War II. Along with other notable musicians such as Count Basie and Big Joe Turner, McShann was featured prominently in the 1979 Kansas City jazz documentary "Last of the Blue Devils," exposing a new generation to his music.

Photo: LaBudde Special Collections, UMKC



Myra Taylor

1917 – 2011

Singer Myra Taylor is recognized as one of the last great performers from Kansas City's jazz heyday of the 1930s. Taylor was born in Bonner Springs, Kansas, but spent her childhood living in the 18th and Vine area of Kansas City. A natural singer and dancer, she was performing in nightclubs by the age of 15. In Taylor's own words, "I got the jobs because I could dance, but kept the jobs because I could sing." Her career took off in the 1930s when she toured the U.S. as a vocalist with the Clarence Love Orchestra and Harlan Leonard and His Rockets.

From 1937-1940, she lived in Chicago and collaborated with several legendary jazz musicians. For the next four decades she toured worldwide, performing in 30 countries, and entertained troops during World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars. Over that time, she wrote and recorded several songs but is best known for "The Spider and the Fly" and "Still Blue Water."

Taylor's career came full circle when she returned to Kansas City in the early 1990s, performing in local nightclubs and starting a jazz group called the Wild Women of Kansas City. She continued to entertain audiences until her death at age 94.

Photo: The Kansas City Call



Harold L. Holliday Sr.

1918 – 1985

Harold Holliday Sr. was a lawyer and legislator who devoted his career to civil rights activism. Born in Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1918, he moved with his family two years later to Kansas City and lived there most of his life. After graduating from Central High School and then earning bachelor's and master's degrees in economics, Holliday was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1942.

Upon returning home, he applied to the University of Kansas City Law School but initially was rejected based on his race. He fought the decision, gained admittance in 1948, and became the first African American to receive a law degree from the school when he graduated four years later. Holliday went on to serve in the Missouri House of Representatives from 1965 to 1976, championing progressive legislation and earning a reputation as an inspiring orator. He was a charter member of Kansas City's Freedom Inc. and served as an officer in the local chapter of the NAACP, in the Urban League, and in multiple bar associations. After leaving the state legislature he continued his public service as a magistrate judge and then as associate regional counsel in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.



Rosie Mason

1918 – 2001

Rosie Mason was a law enforcement trailblazer, working 39 years in the Kansas City Police Department and serving as its first African American female officer. Born in Arkansas in 1918, she began her career in the department as an elevator operator in 1944. Mason made such a positive impression that the police chief recommended her for casework in the juvenile bureau in 1954. She wore a badge and carried a gun but worked as a civilian until the Police Academy began admitting women more than a decade later. Mason graduated from the academy in 1967 and spent the next 15 years as a sworn officer and detective.

She also was active in the International Association of Women Police (IAWP), joining the organization in 1967 and serving as its president from 1976-80. After her age-mandated retirement from the police department in 1982, she became executive director of the 820-member IAWP. Universally commended for her kindness, professionalism, and immaculate personal style, Mason was a committed and compassionate public servant. "It's the child abuse cases that hurt the most," she once said. "Turning one of these young people around seems one of the most significant jobs one can do."



John F. Ramos Jr.

1920 – 1970

John F. Ramos set two important precedents in Kansas City — he was the first African American to become a board-certified radiologist (in 1950) and the first to take a seat on the Kansas City School Board (in 1964). Born in Boston, Ramos earned a bachelor's degree from Seton Hall College before attending Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. He served his internship and residency at the old General Hospital No. 2, Kansas City's hospital for African Americans, earning certification from the American Board of Radiology.

In 1964, the Democratic county committee nominated Ramos to the school board with strong support from Freedom Inc., the Black community's most influential political organization. Earlier attempts to establish an African American presence on the board had failed, but the clout of Freedom Inc., helped push the appointment through. Ramos would be joined in his final year on the board by three additional Black members, the result of a move to public voting on candidates. Ramos served on the school board with quiet dignity, attending nearly every meeting until his health began to decline. Shortly after his death in 1970, the board of education officially named the African American history collection at the Kansas City Public Library in his honor.



Charlie Parker

1920 – 1955

Musical giant Charlie Parker was a key creator of bebop, the jazz style marked by improvisation, quick tempos, and virtuosic technique. Born in Kansas City, Kansas, and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, Parker attended Lincoln High School. As a teenager he devoted 15 hours a day to practicing the saxophone and later played in Kansas City jazz clubs, eventually landing a job with pianist Jay McShann's band. It was while on the road with McShann that Parker got the nickname "Yardbird" or "Bird" after the band's car ran over a chicken (or yardbird) and Parker retrieved the dead animal lest its meat go to waste.

Parker soon moved to New York City and joined the band of Earl "Fatha" Hines, where he met trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, another bebop pioneer. Trumpeter Miles Davis said, "You can tell the history of jazz in four words: Louis Armstrong. Charlie Parker." Though considered too cerebral for the mass audience, Parker's collaborations with Gillespie, Max Roach, Bud Powell, and Davis had a galvanizing effect on the jazz world. Throughout his life Parker struggled with drug addiction. He died in New York City at age 34 and was buried in Kansas City's Lincoln Cemetery.

Photo: The Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City



Lena Rivers Smith

1922 – 1968

Journalist and civil rights advocate Lena Rivers Smith was one of the first African American women to work as a television news reporter in the Midwest. Born and raised in Kansas City, Smith graduated with a degree in English from Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, and went on to study journalism at Northwestern University. She returned to her hometown and in 1950 began a 15-year career at The Kansas City Call, working as a crime reporter, society editor, and city editor. Smith joined the news staff of WDAF-TV in 1965 and began appearing on-air as a reporter in 1967, focusing primarily on local education issues. A gifted speaker who was deeply invested in her community, Smith often publicly discussed her experience of growing up and living in a segregated city, once remarking that discrimination is "a thing I feel, like a hair or a cobweb across my face. It is distracting, degrading, and destructive." She believed in channeling frustration into action and was a member of the NAACP, Council for United Action, and the Panel of American Women. Smith died of a heart attack at age 46 and is buried in Blue Ridge Lawn Cemetery.

Photo: WDAF-TV



Bruce R. Watkins

1924 – 1980

Bruce R. Watkins was an entrepreneur, public official, and community leader. Born Bruce Riley in Parkville, Missouri, Watkins was adopted by his mother's second husband, Theron B. Watkins, co-founder of Watkins Brothers Funeral Home. During World War II, he served with the Tuskegee Airmen, the renowned African American combat aviators. After the war, Watkins joined the family business, where he played an integral role for 30 years.

In 1966, Watkins became the first African American elected to the City Council, where he served two terms. He also was twice elected Jackson County circuit clerk and ran for mayor of Kansas City in 1979. His legacy is memorialized by Bruce R. Watkins Drive and Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Heritage Center, as well as the Spirit of Freedom Fountain that celebrates the contributions of Kansas City's African American community.



Edward Wade Wilson Jr. 1925 – 2019

More than a century after the Kansas City Fire Department was established, Edward Wade Wilson became its first African American chief, capping a trailblazing career of nearly 46 years. Born in Parsons, Kansas, Wilson moved with his family to Kansas City during his elementary school years and attended R.T. Coles and Lincoln high schools.

After graduating in 1943, he joined the fire department as a cadet but soon left to fight with the U.S. Army in Germany during World War II. Upon returning to firefighting, he rose from fire motor operator to captain by age 23. No one so young had previously achieved that rank.

Wilson was promoted to battalion chief in 1960 and deputy chief in 1975. He set another, more important precedent with his appointment as chief in 1980. His tenure encompassed the Hyatt Regency skywalk collapse in 1981 and the deaths of six firemen in a construction site explosion in 1988.

Wilson retired from the department in 1989, going on to work as an insurance investigator and for The Kansas City Star.



Rosemary Smith Lowe 1926 – 2020

Rosemary Smith Lowe broke color barriers in a segregated city, forged Black political power, raised up neighborhoods and, even in her 70s, stood as a fulcrum of peace between police and angry youths. Her family was one of the first to move into Kansas City's Santa Fe Neighborhood in 1952, defying racist covenants.

In the 1960s she became the first Black ward committeewoman in Kansas City and helped establish Freedom Inc., which gave Blacks a political voice, pushed for equal public accommodations in downtown Kansas City, and rallied Black workers' groups. She became a broker for peace in the following decades, mediating meetings between police officials and youth leaders.

Her political involvement won her a place on the Democratic National Committee, where she served from 1980 to 1986. She also served her community as president of the Santa Fe Neighborhood Association, as member of the board of the Kansas City Neighborhood Alliance and the Missouri Board of Cosmetology, and as a founder of Kansas City's Local Investment Commission (LINC).

Photo: Lee Bohannon, Local Investment Commission



Bettye Miller 1928 – 1977

Milt Abel 1928 – 2006

Bettye Miller and Milt Abel, a husband and wife musical duo, reigned over the Kansas City jazz scene from the 1950s through the 1970s.

Miller and Abel first met in 1953 at the Horseshoe Lounge at 32nd St. and Troost Ave., where they continued to perform regularly for 10 years.

They went on to entertain audiences at other venues locally and nationally. After Miller's death in 1977, Abel continued to perform for nearly 30 years, sometimes accompanied by his son from his second marriage, Milton junior, or by Miller's daughter from her first marriage, Bettyejo.



Mary Groves Bland

1936 – 2016

For more than two decades in the Missouri State Legislature as a Democratic representative, Mary Groves Bland was an advocate for the rights of minorities and a champion of equality and social justice. Bland was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and graduated from R.T. Coles High School. She received a certificate in community relations from Ottawa University and later furthered her education at Penn Valley Community College, Webster University, and Harvard University.

Bland's life in public service began in the 1960s when she helped spearhead urban renewal initiatives. In 1980 she was elected to the Missouri House of Representatives and, in 1998, to the Missouri Senate, where she held office until 2005. Over the course of her 25-year political career, Bland helped advance legislation for improved public health, education, housing, and social services.

She received honors from the Missouri Black Leadership Association, Missouri Department of Health, National Black Caucus of State Legislators, and other organizations. She was also the first woman to serve as president of the political action committee Freedom Inc.

Bland's legacy is one of a dedicated public servant who encouraged young people to further their education and participate in public service.

Photo: Official Manual of the State of Missouri, 1989-90



A Commitment of Duty and Honor

We stand at a pivotal time, not only for our county but also for our state and especially our community. This summer people from across Kansas City came out to protest the predominant systemic racism and white supremacy in our country. We must change the system or we will continue to see the killing and disparaging of Black people nationally and locally, right here in our community. The Minneapolis Police Department's murder of George Floyd might have been the catalyst sparking a renewed commitment to the Black Lives Matter protests, but we have our own George Floyds right here in Kansas City.

We never wanted our reality to erupt into a national racial justice crisis, but here we stand, still facing a system of oppression that was not built to uplift, but to disparage and make low. Thanks to the work of many, the public is becoming swiftly educated on the pervasiveness of systemic racism in education, transportation, healthcare, nutrition, housing, jobs, and many other industries vital to communities of color in Kansas City and nationally. We are finally having tough conversations here in our community and will continue to protest, holding our leadership accountable to take action and address these disparities.



Justice T. Horn

I grew up in Kansas City and was born into government housing at Hocker Heights in Independence, Missouri. Throughout my life I knew I was different from the other kids because my father was Black and Indigenous, and my mother was Caucasian and Pacific Islander. I knew growing up that my family had to work harder because the standard was set higher for people of color. We learned rather fast that many of us don't make it out or have the same chance at a better life. A diverse background guided many paths in my life and also propelled my fight for visibility of people of color as a person in the LGBTQ+ community. Those closest to the pain should be closest to the power.

We recognize that we stand on the shoulders of giants in learning the history of those who paved the way before us. It is our duty to accept the torch passed by those who bled for the opportunities we have today. Our actions and continued commitment honor them and their sacrifice. As someone who has been the first at a lot of things, it is also my duty to make sure I'm not the last. There are seats at the table waiting to be filled and our presence has never been more important. We are our fathers' wildest dreams and must continue to lift others.

At this crossroads in history, racism and white supremacy must be addressed with an unlearning of racial bias and a dismantling of incorrect and unjust systems. We can no longer look the other way regarding racism. We must actively adjust to become an antiracist society. I believe there are brighter days ahead, but only if we fervently tackle the issues that have lingered and festered in our country for far too long. From racism and sexism to phobias against sexual identity and orientation, this must all be addressed before we can move forward as one United States of America.

I am committed to endure with my brothers, sisters, gender queer, and nonbinary folks in this fight for justice until every child who looks like me lives in a community that reflects true equity. I will not rest until every Black child feels the support of a government that affords them the same opportunity and access as their white counterpart. We all deserve a community that enables us to thrive and encourages us to dream.

We have complex problems that need real solutions, and we must fully understand the task at hand. Change comes when we persist in unity. We must be smarter, stronger, and better than ever to successfully overcome these challenges. We appreciate those who are saying "Black Lives Matter," and we invite them to gain a deeper understanding of systemic racism and its direct impact on Black Lives. For us to change a system, it will require knowledge, fortitude, and unwavering energy exemplified in all of us. We must be the change we want to see in our community.

Justice T. Horn

Community leader, political consultant, and social justice activist.





Joelouis Mattox

1937 – 2017

Joelouis Mattox's dream as a young man was to teach high school history. Military service altered his course, but history — the pursuit and preservation of Kansas City's African American past — remained a lifelong calling. Named for Joe Louis, the boxing champion he would come to regard as a hero, Mattox was raised in segregated Caruthersville in southeast Missouri in the 1940s and '50s.

He studied history and government at Lincoln University in Jefferson City before being drafted into the U.S. Army Signal Corps in 1962. Discharged four years later, he settled in the Kansas City to pursue a career in community development, housing management, and historic preservation. He also emerged as one of the city's leading champions of African American history, tirelessly researching events and individuals, fighting to save local landmarks, speaking at libraries and other venues, and serving as historian for a number of agencies and organizations, including American Legion Wayne Miner Post 149. The Jackson County Historical Society gave Mattox its Cultural Heritage Award in 2007. A year later, he received the President's Volunteer Service Award. And in 2014, Kansas City's Human Relations Department honored him with the Martin Luther King Jr. Spirit of Unity Award.

Photo: Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library

Horace M. Peterson III 1945 – 1992

Peterson was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and as a child moved with his family to Kansas City, Missouri. He graduated from Central High School in 1964 and attended Arkansas A&M College in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, where he received a Bachelor of Arts in sociology in 1968.

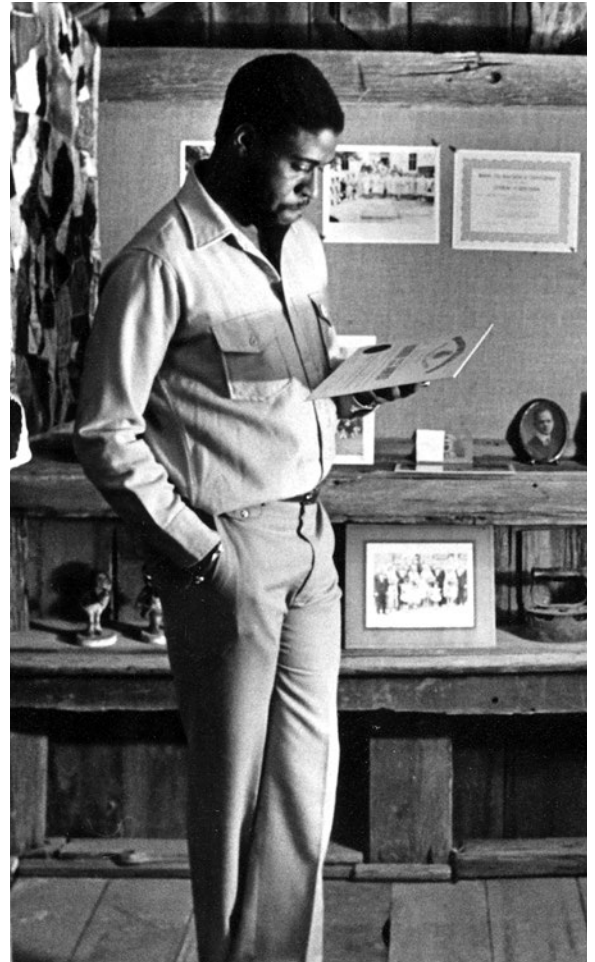
Peterson was fascinated by stories of the African American experience in the Midwest and was devoted to preserving them. An expert in African American history and Missouri folklore, he is best known for establishing the Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City.

His interest in African American culture and reputation as a historian allowed him to collect materials for the archives, which continue to serve the Kansas City community today. Collections include photographs and artifacts from former slaves, the Buffalo Soldiers, and choreographer Alvin Ailey.

In 1992, Peterson was honored by the Missouri governor for outstanding contributions to bridging race relations.

His tragic drowning death in 1992 robbed Kansas City of one of its best known and most productive citizens.

Photo: The Kansas City Star/Times



Bailus Tate Jr. 1946 – 2020

Described as barreling through life blind to failure, Bailus M. Tate Jr. worked his way up from shoveling coal in the basement of Kansas City Power and Light, retiring 33 years later as the utility giant's vice president of human resources.

He was born in a military family, spending much of his childhood growing up on Army bases in the U.S. and Germany. He graduated from Central High School in 1964 and served three years in the Navy. While working at KCP&L he also continued his education, earning a bachelor's degree from Park University and a master's degree in Human Resources Management from Central Michigan University.

A trailblazer in the corporate world, he became a civic leader as well. Among his many roles, he served as board president of the Kansas City Board of Police Commissioners, the Metropolitan Kansas City Crime Commission, the Kansas City Port Authority, and Genesis School.

He was co-chair of the Local Investment Commission (LINC), treasurer of the Kansas City Police Pension Board, and a member of the Family and Community Trust board.

Photo: Local Investment Commission



Bernard Powell

1947 – 1979

Bernard Powell was a leader in local and national efforts to end racial discrimination and increase the political and economic power of African Americans.

Powell joined the NAACP at age 13. After graduating from Central High School in 1965, he joined Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the Selma-to-Montgomery March.

He later became regional director of the Congress of Racial Equality. In the wake of the April 1968 assassination of Dr. King, Powell established the Social Action Committee of 20 (SAC-20) to provide leadership skills to young African Americans. For these and similar endeavors, he received many honors including the Jefferson Award for Public Service. Powell was shot to death in 1979 at age 32.

The Bernard Powell Memorial, a life-sized bronze statue within a fountain in Spring Valley Park, commemorates his life and legacy.



Photo: Kansas City Missouri Parks and Recreation

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*(Above) Bruce R. Watkins leads students and others in a march down I-70 towards the Kansas City, Missouri, City Hall as part of protests following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968.
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