

Race in Kansas

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There is no excuse for denying any American citizen his rights. This is not a project to defend discrimination in Kansas. I will try and show that "the values of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's material wealth and successful competition caused Kansas blacks to determine their process by standards in force for society at large."¹

The history of race relations in Kansas can aptly be called a paradox. It cannot be put in an either/or box. There can be no blanket statement for Kansas like there can be for Mississippi. "Almost from its birth, Kansas had been synonymous in the national mind with abolitionism and John Brown, where anti-slavery fought a bloody and ultimately successful battle to exclude slavery from western lands. Their efforts precipitated the Civil War in which the Jayhawkers raised the first black regiment for Union service."² Kansas residents took their Free State roots very seriously. While lynching rose in the South, Kansas and the Midwest had very little violence connected with race. Kansas blacks, especially in Topeka, used the courts on a large scale for racial wrong doings. In fact, most of the black communities in the larger cities of Kansas became very adept at using the courts. Before Kansas City, Kansas built the first all black Sumner High School, the black parents "organized an extraordinary resistance movement that utilized the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the state government."³ By the end of the nineteenth century, Kansas, and Topeka in particular, were straddling the race line. James Leiker asks the question, "How could the free state that opened its door to fugitive slaves and free blacks be a land of Jim Crow?"⁴ Leiker also tells us that Kansans' racial attitudes were "neither consistent nor

¹ William H. Chafe, "The Negro and Populism: A Kansas Study," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 34, (August, 1996), 404.

² James N. Leiker, "Race Relations in the Sunflower State," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Great Plains*, Vol. 25, (Autumn, 2002), 220.

³ David J. Peavler, "Drawing the Color Line in Kansas City," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Great Plains*, Vol. 27, (Autumn, 2002), 189.

⁴ Leiker, "Race Relations," 220.

monolithic.”⁵ Most Topekans favored segregation while having integrated YMCAs and YWCAs and being home to a large number of blacks that held important state and political jobs.

Although Americans often think of Kansas as a progressive state in regard to race relations, I argue that Kansas lay halfway between true equality and true segregation. Topeka is a perfect example of this indecision to go either way.

African American Kansans had been loyal to the Republican Party since their emancipation. But by the end of the nineteenth century, they were becoming disillusioned with it. The Democratic Party was out of the question, but the Populist Party looked hopeful. The Populist Party seemed to be willing to give some African Americans what they were looking for, “promises of protection and patronage.”⁶ The black Kansans did not really “subscribe to Populist attacks on the rich and wellborn that in the past had been their most dependable protectors. They were conservatives, not radicals.”⁷

In many ways Kansas was the New Canaan advertised in the black newspapers of the South. But in many others it was not the Utopian Garden of Eden. Historians such as Randall Woods concluded that racism “was not as widespread or as pervasive as that experienced by African Americans who chose to remain in the Jim Crow South.”⁸ Or even the North. Kansas might have been the land of John Brown, but, “whether they lived in integrated rural settlements or in black neighborhoods in white cities, blacks found themselves members of a Kansas working society dominated by the Caucasian race.”⁹

Race relations are always sticky politically, but in Kansas they were stickier than usual. In the Supreme Court Case *Brown v. The*

⁵ Ibid., 221.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Chafe, “The Negro and Populism,” 404.

⁸ Monroe Lee Billington and Roger D. Hardway, eds., *African Americans on the Western Frontier*, (Denver: Colorado University Press, 1983), 2.

⁹ Billington and Hardway, *African Americans on the Western Frontier*, 2.

Board of Education of Topeka, 1954, the city of Topeka was the main culprit. One might surmise that Topeka was a hotbed of racial injustice. This could not be further from the truth. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had only a small branch office there. But Topeka became the rallying cry for Civil Rights. When it was all over and all the big wigs from the national office had gone home and the case had been settled, the branch office of the NAACP stayed its original size. From 1954 on, however, Topeka and Kansas made great strides in conquering its race problems. Kansas was one of the first states to comply quickly with the Supreme Court decision.

Topeka had a vibrant and viable black community that mirrored the white community in many ways. Woods has characterized this system of mirroring “as one of parallel development.”¹⁰ Like whites, blacks had newspapers that prospered and were well known throughout the state. Some of them were still around to usher in the Civil Rights Movement and were read by people all over the country.

Following the tenets of Booker T. Washington, black ministers started an institute for industrial arts that morphed into the Topeka Technical, totally supported by the state. This institute became the home to the Topeka School of Nursing that graduated nurses until the 1980s.

Religion has always played an important role in the life of the black community and Topeka was no exception. Even when their ministers were not ordained or seminary trained, they always encouraged their members to build churches. The churches “provided guidance and an understanding of the problems of everyday living.”¹¹ These black churches gave us some of the best known and respected leaders of the Civil Rights Movement.

¹⁰ Randall R. Woods, “Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation: the Color Line in Kansas, 1878-1900,” *Western History Quarterly*, 14, (1983), 181.

¹¹ Margaret Mitchell Marshall, *An Account of Afro-Americans in Southeast Kansas, 1884-1984*, (Pittsburg: Sunflower Press, 1986), 6.

The men and women who settled Kansas placed their emphasis on "rugged individualism, enterprise, and pragmatism, allowing human beings to work out their destinies regardless of race."¹² For Kansas, the answer is somewhere in the middle.

Is It Free or Not? Racial issues have identified Kansas since its very beginning. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act on May 26, 1854, signed in to law by President Franklin Pierce, opened the territories to popular sovereignty. "The Kansas-Nebraska Act created not only Kansas Territory; it repealed the venerated slavery expansion compromise of 1820 and upset the tenuous 1850 agreement."¹³ The citizens of the new settlements would be able to decide for themselves whether they wanted to be free or slave. Would this decision go the way of the abolitionists or the way of the slave holder? As it turned out, for several years it went the way of both. Popular sovereignty was a very volatile concept. Senator Stephen Douglas stated that a territory was "a distinct political community that could pass its own laws on slavery."¹⁴ If Kansas entered the Union as a free state; it would upset the balance of equal free and slave states. This battling of free and slave citizens of the new territory was the reason that Kansas had at least three constitutions in its pre-statehood history. Each side tried to outdo the other. The popularly elected legislature fluctuated back and forth between free and slave.

Because of their geographical closeness, Missouri figured largely in Kansas' business for years to come. Taking advantage of the fact that they had the biggest slice of the pie at the exact time that the territory was opened for settlement, the Missourians crossed the border "and established towns, as a means of making firm their preemptory claim over the territory. They also formed a territorial legislature whose prime directive was to preserve slavery."¹⁵ Missouri

¹² Billington and Hardway, *African Americans on the Western Frontier*, 2.

¹³ Gary Cheatham, "Slavery All the Time or Not At All: The Wyandotte Constitutional Debate, 1859-1861, *Kansas History: A Journal of the Great Plains*, Vol. 21, (Autumn, 1998), 154.

¹⁴ Cheatham, "Slavery All the Time or Not At All," 156.

¹⁵ Thomas C. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas, 1865-1913*, (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 4.

wanted to make Kansas “an outpost of slavery on its western flank.”¹⁶ Wanting to ensure a firm foothold for slavery, they attempted to settle the matter with legislation. These laws that went into effect on September 15, 1855, “were designed to both protect slavery and menace the Free State movement.”¹⁷ The pro-slavery enthusiasts based these statutes on slavery statutes from Virginia. Not only could settlers own slaves, but if one was against slavery it became a crime to even speak against it. No wonder the Free Staters called it the “bogus legislature.” This statute was in effect until 1857. That year the Free Staters gained control of the legislature and worked with Governor John Geary to repeal it. This they did on February 5, 1857. The pro-slavers ignored this repeal and instead concentrated on the Dred Scot decision. “Pro-slavery Kansans eagerly interpreted Dred Scot as supporting their belief that slavery could not be outlawed in the territory.”¹⁸ The “early settlers did not wish to participate in the free state/pro-slavery contest and hoped to avoid the escalating border war.”¹⁹ Many of the homesteaders came from the South and the Ohio Valley. But these apolitical early settlers that came to Kansas did so for land and opportunities, not to further the politics of the pro-slavers. Most of the settlers from the South did not even own slaves.

At the same time as Missourians were setting up towns and legislatures to promote slavery, the New England Emigrant Company of Massachusetts was bringing abolitionists out to settle the new territory. These New Englanders may have been coming to Kansas “with avowed intentions of rescuing the territory from the clutches of slavery,” but they also were looking for opportunities to make money.²⁰ The New England Emigrant Aid Company was “incorporated as a stock company after the first few months of its operation. It was a queer combination of philanthropic venture and money-making scheme.”²¹ They truly thought that they could make a

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ Cheatham, “Slavery All the Time or Not At All,” 158.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 4.

²⁰ Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 4.

²¹ Samuel A. Johnson, “The Emigrant Aid Company in Kansas,” *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 5, (November, 1932), 429.

difference in Kansas, capitalize on the rise in land values, and pay off all their loans to their backers in Massachusetts while making a profit. It is a misnomer to believe that all abolitionists were pacifists. A prominent New England minister, Henry Beecher, (his sister Harriett, wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853), reported to the *New York Times* in February, 1856, that he,

Believed that the Sharps Rifle was a truly moral agency, and that there was power in one of those instruments, so far as the slave holders of Kansas are concerned than in a hundred Bibles. you might just as well...read the Bible to Buffalos as to those fellows who follow Atchison...but they have a supreme respect for the logic that is embedded in Sharpe's Rifles.²²

Consequently, many of these rifles were sent to Kansas in crates marked Bibles, and became known as "Beecher's Bibles" "to be used against pro-slavery 'Border Ruffians' during the time known as 'Bleeding Kansas.'"

On the floor of the U.S. Senate, Senator William Seward told its members, "We will engage in competition for the virgin soil of Kansas and God give the victory to the side which is stronger in numbers as it is in the right."²³ In 1854, Topeka and Lawrence became its biggest strongholds. But the pro-slavery advocates still maintained the majority in population, although the abolitionists were not far behind.

The Free Soil Party, a precursor to the Republican Party in Kansas, was the new political party started by the Free Staters. In 1859, they succeeded in making Topeka the permanent capital of the territory. This was a definite plus on the side of the New England Emigrant Company and a very definite indicator of power and prestige. It is important to remember that being an abolitionist did not mean that you were for racial equality. At this early stage in the

²² Johnson, "The Emigrant Aid Company in Kansas," 429.

²³ Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, Kansas, 6.

territory, the Free State Party was advocating for the dissolution of slavery it is true but,

If residents of the territory were prepared to believe that God opposed slavery, they were by no means willing to assume personal responsibility for its consequences. God might well instruct his followers to loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, and let the oppressed go free, but he had said nothing about granting blacks free²⁴

The Free State Party, which was not made up entirely of abolitionists, "was less about equality of the races and more about how slavery would have negative effects on whites rather than on blacks."²⁵ The *Kansas Free State*, published in Lawrence, told its readers that slavery was "an institution that paralyzes the hand of moral and intellectual effort, that dries all energy and enterprise from its presence, and substitutes idleness, intemperance and debauchery that decreases the white population...slavery created a backward and stagnant society."²⁶ By the 1850s, the North believed that their social order was superior to the South. In Eric Foner's book, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, he tells us, "It was an affirmation of the superiority of the social system of the North...a dynamic expanding capitalist society whose achievements and destiny were almost wholly the result of the dignity and opportunities which it offered the average laboring man."²⁷ On April 7, 1855, the *Kansas Free State* responded to allegations from the South that the Northern poor were no better off than the slaves by editorializing that,

²⁴ David W. Johnson, "Free Soilers for God: Newspaper Editors and the Antislavery Crusade," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Great Plains*, Vol. 2, (summer, 1979), 80.

²⁵ Leiker, "Race Relations," 220.

²⁶ Bill Cecil-Fronsman, "Advocate the Freedom of the White Man as Well as Well as the Negro: The *Kansas Free State* and Antislavery Westerners in Territorial Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Great Plains*, Vol. 20, (Summer, 1997), 221.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 222.

...these poor are not deprived of a single inalienable right by law but stand on an equal footing with the rich. They have also a perfect right to flee the country, without being pursued, either by a pack of bloodhounds or a fugitive slave Act, where they could readily better their conditions and live independently.²⁸

Kansas has always "had a commitment to black's legal freedom and a hesitation to embrace the full realization of that freedom through the extension of political and social equality." At the Topeka convention, the majority of delegates, Free Soil and pro-slavery alike, passed a resolution called the "Black Laws" that prohibited entrance into the state for either free blacks or escaped slaves. The Kansas Free State newspaper stated that "we are opposed in principal to the Black Laws, but if the majority says that they will go for slavery if we do not give them a Black Law, then we say for the sake of policy, that they should have a Black Law."²⁹ Predictably, the resolution passed by a large number of votes (1287-453) but the constitution delivered that day failed to be accepted by Congress. There were enough true abolitionists living in the territory, however, that even the threat of those kinds of laws made them very unhappy. Several townspeople became conductors on the Underground Railroad, and many towns in Kansas became depots. The "freedom line ran through Lawrence, Topeka, and Kansas City, into Nebraska and Iowa."³⁰ Twenty-five years later, Judge Dwight Thacher, the editor of the *Lawrence Republican*, wrote in his personal papers that, "the whole purpose of the Topeka Convention had been to maintain Free-State loyalty until there were enough free soilers in the territory to win by sheer force of numbers."³¹ And the editor of the

²⁸ Cecil-Fronsman, "Advocate the Freedom of the White Man as Well as Well as the Negro," 211.

²⁹ Cecil-Fronsman, "Advocate the Freedom of the White Man as Well as Well as the Negro," 115.

³⁰ Cox, *Blacks In Topeka*, 4.

³¹ Johnson, "Free Soilers for God, 80.

Lawrence-based *Kansas Free State Journal*, wrote that “the free state label was to compromise all those in favor of making Kansas free, not from any peculiar sympathy for the Negro or regard for his rights, but because it would be to the pecuniary gain of the masses to have it free.”³²

As troubles with Missouri escalated in to “Bloody Kansas,” the settlers, who were originally non-committal, felt that “they were pushed into an uneasy Free State alliance by what they viewed as the heavy-handed effort of pro-slavery advocates, primarily Missourians, to impose the peculiar institution upon them.”³³ On March 30, 1855, over a thousand Missourians crossed the border to vote illegally “Anti-slavery Kansans who might have had little sympathy with slaves could see a clear threat to their own independence from an outside conspiratorial force.”³⁴ They were afraid of being “trampled by a government determined to impose slavery upon them.”³⁵

By 1859, Kansans were meeting yet again to try and get a constitution ready to present to Congress for a presidential signature. This time they came together in Wyandotte (Kansas City, Kansas) to begin deliberations. This constitution was going to settle the question of slavery and Kansas once and for all. The Union was on the verge of a civil war over this very thing and Kansas wanted to be a state before it happened. This time the free staters were in power and it was extremely important to the Republicans to get this passed before hostilities began. On three different occasions, Kansas had attempted to submit constitutions. The first one was the Topeka Convention in 1855, where the Black Laws were instituted. This one was not accepted by Congress because, “proslavery voters boycotted the referendums and because it was the product of an extralegal assembly.”³⁶ The second one was the Leecompton Convention in

³² Cecil-Fronsman, “Advocate the Freedom of the White Man as Well as Well as the Negro,” 108.

³³ Cecil-Fronsman, “Advocate the Freedom of the White Man as Well as Well as the Negro,” 109.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Cheatham, “Slavery All the Time,” 170.

December 1857 and January 1858, which also failed “because various boycotts by antislavery and proslavery voters did not convince Congress of the legitimacy of the document.”³⁷ Thirdly, there was the Leavenworth Constitution in August 1858, which was not accepted either. By the summer of 1859, the legislature was ready to try for the fourth and last time. In 1861, Governor Charles Robinson commented, “The necessity for so much constitution-making and strife as Kansas had experienced during the last past six years, has been caused chiefly by the question of slavery.”³⁸ Even though the existence of slavery in Kansas was a proven fact, antislavery voices had become dominant. They hoped that this new constitution would eliminate the question of slavery once and for all. They believed that you could not have it both ways. They wanted this new constitution to make it clear, that if Kansas was going to come into the Union as a free state, that meant that not only was slavery to be a mute question, but owners had to free the slaves they owned. An interesting thing about the convention was that it was the first time the new Republican Party “actually squared off against their Democratic counterparts.”³⁹ Though the question of slavery was the most important, it was not as hotly debated as some others. The only real serious questions raised about slavery were two-fold: should slavery be outlawed on the day Kansas became a state or would slave owners be allowed “a reasonable time for removing their slaves from Kansas.”⁴⁰ Since Republicans were in the majority, the answers to those two questions were yes and no respectively. Slavery was going to be over in Kansas. The *Fort Scott Democrat* reported on September 16, 1859, “As a practical question, the alternative of slavery or no slavery have [sic] been decided.”⁴¹ Democrats from both the North and South then began to work together to “save the state from the despotic rule of Abolitionists and Black Republicans.”⁴²

³⁷ Cheatham, “Slavery All the Time,” 170.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Cheatham, “Slavery All the Time,” 175.

The Wyandotte Convention “debated the state boundary question, the capital site, the homestead exemption, whether to restrict black immigration and various issues concerning the designs of the legislature.”⁴³ The Wyandotte Convention was approved by thirty-four of the forty-seven voting delegates on July 29, 1859. The Democrats, who were in the minority, immediately stated that they opposed it “because it was an instrument of the Republicans,”⁴⁴ and that they were afraid that it would “open the gates for an influx of free Negroes from Missouri, Arkansas, the Indian Territory, and Texas.”⁴⁵ This constitution was very liberal for its time. Blacks were not given the right to vote, but the Black Laws were repealed and blacks were allowed to live and settle in Kansas whether they were free or slave. Likewise, women were not given the franchise, but they were given the right to vote in school board elections, and given the same right to pursue higher education as men, and all state colleges were to be co-educational. The Wyandotte Constitution was accepted by Congress and President Buchanan. Kansas became a state on January 29, 1861.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Kansas was only three months old. Even so, she provided nineteen regiments and four artillery batteries in response to President Lincoln’s call for troops.⁴⁶ Kansas suffered “nearly 8,500 casualties and sustained some of the highest mortality rates of any state in the Union: sixty one percent.”⁴⁷

After the war, Kansas began to “reshape the memory of the Free State struggle, framing it as a struggle not only for white political and economic freedom but for the liberation of African-Americans as well.”⁴⁸ Most Kansans were not comfortable with the idea of social

⁴³ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Becky Tanner, “Kansans Serve with Honor,” *Wichita Eagle*, (Front Page, November 11, 2010).

⁴⁷ Tanner, “Kansans Serve with Honor.”

⁴⁸ Brent M.S. Campney, Emory University, “This Is Not Dixie: The Imagined South, the Kansas Free State Narrative and the Rhetoric of Racist Violence,” *Southern Spaces*, (September 6, 2007).

equality with blacks, but at the same time they were equally uncomfortable with denying black people the basic liberties for which their state stood.

By the end of the Civil War, the total population of blacks in Kansas was only nine percent. Whites and blacks coexisted on friendly and equal terms as long as the population numbers stayed low. As Leiker tells us, "Toleration carried little cost in the sparsely settled rural areas of the plains."⁴⁹ African-Americans discovered that the further west they went the more racial restraints loosened for them. In 1862, the Homestead Act was passed in Congress and pioneers of both races set out for the West. Under this act, one could "acquire 160 acres of farmland by paying the government a fee of \$16.00, and living on and improving the land for five years to receive the title."⁵⁰ Blacks who lived in cities like Dodge City and Caldwell experienced equality in nearly everything they did. They went to the same churches, ate in the same restaurants, stayed in the same hotels and their children went to school with their white neighbors. Racial discord was there of course, but these developing cattle towns had very little segregation. Several African Americans became wealthy ranchers and land owners. Willis Peoples was one of those cattlemen. His ranch won the silver cup at the 1903 Kansas City Stock Show for the finest Hereford yearlings. Peoples had been a slave who migrated here from the south and became a cowboy in Dodge City. By the end of reconstruction, blacks in the South were beginning to see the writing on the wall. Rather quickly,

...Negroes realized that the North's commitment to equal rights was transitory and that the South was merely biding time, waiting for the chance to exclude the freedman from participation in the political process and relegate him to a servile status in the region's economic system.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Leiker, "Race Relations," 222.

⁵⁰ Marshall, *An Account of Afro-Americans*, 11.

⁵¹ Billington and Hardway, *African-Americans, on the Western Frontier*, 3.

All too quickly, any political or economic gains they had made were being systematically and violently stripped away. A black man from Mississippi, who went to Kansas after reconstruction, and later returned to Mississippi for his family was "...seized by whites. His hands were cut off and he was thrown into his wife's arms with the comment, 'Now go to Kansas and work.'" ⁵² In 1878, S.A. Hackworth, a former slave from Texas, wrote to Governor John St. John of Kansas that,

Our masters will ever regard us as legal property stolen and forcibly taken away from then, and if They can't get our labor for nothing in one way, they will invent some other plan by which they can, for they make all the laws and own all the lands... The longer we stay here the worse it will become because our old masters are raising their children to believe and act as they do. We have been free for fourteen years and still we are poor and ignorant, yet we make as much cotton and sugar as we did when we were slaves, and it does us as little good now as it did then. ⁵³

Mr. Hackworth was one of the many blacks that came to Kansas during the 1870s in the Exodus. He and about a hundred other blacks settled in Graham County and called their town Nicodemus. This city was settled entirely by blacks and was a viable and successful farming community until the horrible dust storms of the thirties. If nothing else, Nicodemus was a story of perseverance, grit and determination, and the belief that freedom and self-government are worth any sacrifice.

The Military. The military has always played a big part in the history of Kansas. The Kansas First Infantry, established by James Lane in 1862 was the Union's first black regiments, Illegally as it turns

⁵² William Loren Katz, *Black People Who Made the Old West*, (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1992), 154.

⁵³ Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), 3.

out, but even so, blacks were fighting for Kansas and the Union from the beginning. Some of the blacks were still slaves at that time. The story usually just ends there with the regiment being formed and doing brave things, and James Lane being credited with starting it. It probably should too, because Lane had little altruistic or noble reasons for doing so. He was a true Free Soiler and "in no sense did his actions proceed from an egalitarian impulse. Lane believed that Negroes might just as well be cannon fodder as someone in his own family."⁵⁴

By the end of the Civil War, the military's resources were being stretched to the limit. The South required a military presence as part of Reconstruction, Mexico was in a conflict with France and the border needed to be patrolled, and transportation routes to the goldfields in Montana and California had to be protected. This was all being done with fewer than forty thousand regular Army men. The Army's answer to these problems was to start allowing blacks to sign up. There had been 175,000 black men who had fought and died bravely in the Civil War. The Republican Congress felt the time was right to rescind the ban on allowing blacks to become part of the regular Army. When the Appropriation Act of 1866 was passed, it "provided for an expanded army and it specified that four regiments of infantry and two of cavalry would be composed of colored men."⁵⁵ Despite having to serve in segregated regiments, black soldiers "enjoyed a more equal footing with white soldiers than they would see again for decades."⁵⁶ Unfortunately, by the turn of the century, Jim Crow had raised its ugly head and invaded the military. In 1901, "the Army expanded to include thirty-three thousand men, but provided for no new black regiments."⁵⁷

At the Capitol in Topeka, blacks succeeded in "persuading the legislature to strike the word white from the militia clause in the state constitution. Nevertheless, blacks had to wait until the political unrest

⁵⁴ Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 10.

⁵⁵ William A. Dobak, "Fort Riley's Black Soldier and the Army's Changing Role in the West," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Great Plains*, Vol. 22, (Autumn, 1992), 216.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

of the 1890s and the war with Spain to officially be incorporated into the Kansas National Guard," in segregated units, of course.⁵⁸

There were many influential, prominent white public officials who advocated black suffrage. Governor Samuel T. Crawford asserted that he saw "no reason in law or ethics which should exclude Negroes from all rights that others enjoy who no more are worthy, because of race or color...subjection of Negroes to discrimination in unjust, unwise, and tyrannical and ought to have no toleration, either by parties or legislative bodies."⁵⁹ Samuel Wood was a member of the state Senate and had formerly been prominent in the anti-slavery movement. Wood was one of the abolitionists who truly believed that slavery was a godless institution that was against all Christian values. Along with a prominent black attorney, Charles H. Langston, Wood organized the state Impartial Suffrage Association in Topeka in 1867, "to provide an agency to disseminate information and to garner support for equal voting rights, in the broad sense, without regard to sex, race, or color."⁶⁰ Former Governor Thomas Carney urged Kansas to "lead in the moral work as she had in the great martial work."⁶¹ In 1869, the electorate rejected an amendment to remove the racial qualifications from the state constitution. Governor James M. Harvey told the state legislature that, "Uniformity in the civil and political rights of its citizens should be required of every government. There can be no justification in the retention of a monopoly of political power in our own favored class or white male citizens."⁶² The rejection of black suffrage coincided with the rise in the black population in Kansas. It went from "a mere 627 in 1860 to 12,000 by 1866."⁶³ This rise was primarily in the larger cities such as Topeka, Wichita, and Kansas City. As mentioned before, the lower the population numbers, the more equal rights were afforded. With this sudden rise in the black population in the larger cities, the more prevalent was the segregation. The passage of the Fifteenth

⁵⁸ Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 26.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 26.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶² Leiker, "Race Relations," 222.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Amendment in 1870, however took the suffrage issue out of the hands of Kansas. In an odd twist of fate, neither of the two Kansas senators was present. Senator Edmond Ross, who took James Lane's seat, later confessed "to a degree of humiliation at the failure of Kansas to eliminate the race qualifications for suffrage on its own initiative."⁶⁴

Church Influences in the Black Communities. The 1870s saw a large growth in the number of black churches that sprang up in Kansas. One of the first things former slaves did after the Civil War was to freely and openly build churches or establish places of worship wherever they could. For the first time blacks were able to put official denomination names on their buildings. They might only have had the use of a dilapidated building, but it would have a recognizable religious name on it. Black ministers who were ordained could now come and set up parishes.

The churches formed the backbone of many black communities. From the African Methodist Episcopal and Baptist churches to the black Pentecostals and the Church of God, and Saints of Christ, their influence with the African American communities, and on the state as a whole has been enormous.⁶⁵

Even though it seems that the two do not belong together, religion and politics were combined in the black churches. In the churches, parishioners could come to air their grievances about discrimination, and find out the feelings of their fellow blacks concerning a possible run for a political office. All church membership became a status symbol. One would never be taken seriously in the black community if not a practicing member of a congregation, because status was not based on occupation alone. Black ministers had a great deal of influence on the social and moral shaping of black Kansas.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 223.

⁶⁵ Amy Leigh Beecher, "The African American Religious Experience in Kansas," (http://www.ku.edu/ksreligion/docs/history/african_american.pdf),3.

Whatever denomination blacks chose to belong to, Membership in one or the other of the churches was a sign of social success. Prominence in the Church and in social affairs provided a measure of influence in the black community as a whole. The church clearly reflected the dimensions of ascribed and achieved status as well as growth of the Negro community.⁶⁶

Politically, a black man who was considering a run for a political office, or a patronage job, especially in the Capitol of Topeka, would have to be a man that the minister could honestly recommend to the whites. The black churches were where the best of the black community came from. These men were honest, God-fearing, and would come highly recommended. This is where a black politician would find his constituents, and raise money.

In the late nineteenth century, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was the best organized and wealthiest of the black churches. By 1890, it had sixty-eight organized congregations in Kansas with a membership of 3,600. These A.M.E. churches were generally home to the elite of the black community. Black A.M.E. ministers often had the ear of the other race, also. The "ministers of the A.M.E. churches played a key role in city and state government and civic affairs."⁶⁷

There are several A.M.E. churches in Kansas that are historically noteworthy. The first A.M.E. church was in Leavenworth and was a hotbed of pro-slavery sympathy. This church was built in 1859 by the Reverend John M. Wilkerson. It was a frame structure that had an unfilled basement underneath. This basement became a station on the Underground Railroad during the Civil War. St. Luke's A.M.E. in Lawrence also had a stop on the Underground Railroad in 1862. In 1888, the A.M.E. church in Quindaro, (Kansas City, Kansas), founded Western University. This all black university became an industrial college in 1902. Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church of Topeka still sits on the original foundation from 1887. The current church was built in 1930 and has a very interesting architectural feature, "six stained

⁶⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁷ Beecher, "The African American Religious Experience in Kansas," 5.

glass windows that chronicle important achievements of blacks throughout American history.”⁶⁸ In 1982, the church added two additional windows that honor Martin Luther King, Jr. and the *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 court case.

The most important role that black churches have played in the history of Kansas and the nation as a whole has been in the Civil Rights Movement. In Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X we have two men who were “strong religious figures for which faith was a major drive for recognition and equality.”⁶⁹ The biggest influence of religion in the civil rights movement happened right here in Kansas in the *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The case that finally eliminated Jim Crow and school segregation was brought to the courts by “among others, the Reverend Oliver Brown, the pastor of St. Mark’s A.M.E. Church in Topeka.”⁷⁰ To this day, in the twenty-first century, the black churches are still the backbone of their communities.

Fraternal Orders and Civic Clubs. In March, 1775, a free black man named Prince Hall and fourteen other free blacks, were made Master Masons in the Army Lodge attached to one of General Gage’s regiments, then stationed near Boston. This same Mason’s Lodge granted these blacks authority to meet at their lodge, to go in procession at St. John’s Day and as a Lodge to bury their dead; but they could not confer or perform any other Masonic work. For nine years these men, together with other free black men who had received their degrees elsewhere, assembled and enjoyed their limited privileges as Masons. Finally in March, 1784,

Prince Hall petitioned the Grand Lodge in England, through a Worshipful Master of a subordinate lodge in London for a warrant or charter. On September 29, 1784, the Warrant was issued. It was not delivered, however, until three years later owing to the fact that the brother to whom the

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁹ Beecher, “The African American Religious Experience in Kansas,” 6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

matter was entrusted, failed to deliver it. It was not delivered. However, until the 29th of April, 1787, by Capt. James Smith, a seafaring man, who was incidentally the brother-in-law of John Hancock one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.⁷¹

On May 6, 1787, by virtue of the authority of this charter, African Lodge, number forty-nine was established and began to work as a regular Masonic body. Soon after that, a General Assembly of Black Masons met in Mason's Hall, in Boston, and formed African Grand Lodge with Prince Hall as its first Grand Master. Prince Hall died in 1807, and in his honor their Grand Lodge changed from African Grand Lodge to Prince Hall Grand Lodge.

Fraternal organizations of all kinds were important status symbols to the prominent black man. But the Mason's were especially important because they had been open to black men since before the Revolution. For the black man this fact was a confirmation that they were as much true Americans as their white counterparts. Large cities like Topeka, Wichita, and Kansas City, all had Masonic Orders. Even the smaller cities like Dodge City and Olathe had chapters. Other large cities in the Union also had orders and like all Masons traveling between chapters was done on a regular basis. Yearly meetings were held in various cities just like they were for their white brothers. The Masons of any city were obligated under Masonic fraternal rules to allow any Masons, black or white, the right to hold their meetings in any Masonic Hall available. This included the use of the hall for social gatherings as well. In Topeka, to abide by this rule, white Masons had the bottom floor and black Masons the top. In Dodge City, the black Masons were the first to build a hall so they got the bottom floor and the whites the top. Along with the Masons, the larger cities were host to several different fraternal organizations such as the Knights Templars, Knights of Pythias, and the Oddfellows.

⁷¹ "Beginnings of Free Masonry among Negroes in America," a souvenir program, 99th Annual Communication Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge F. and M. of Kansas Jurisdiction, June 5-6-7, 1974, (Wichita State University Archives).

All of these men's fraternal organizations had ladies' auxiliaries attached to them. These women, like their white female counterparts, handled all the social concerns and programs for their own race. Keeping in mind that black women, like white women were an extension of their husband's reputation and class, wives and daughters of prominent black men, especially minister's wives, were well aware of their role in the cult of true womanhood. Without significant exception, the wives of these men did not work. "Indeed as an indicator of leadership status, the wife's use of leisure time in social and philanthropic affairs was as important a criterion for status as her husband's activities."⁷² The life of a black middle class woman in late nineteenth century Kansas was every bit as confining as her white sister in Boston. In Topeka, the Woman's Benevolent Society Number Three boasted of being "the largest in the city and with proper management could be a powerful force for good."⁷³ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham wrote that "Largely through the fund raising efforts of women, the black church built schools, provided clothes, and food to poor people, establishes old folks homes and orphanages, and made available a host of needed social welfare services."⁷⁴ It was the black women who initiated charity and reforms, and the black man who tended to invest their reforms energy in politics and law.

In 1896, the year of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a group of black women from across the country got together in Washington, D.C. and the National Association of Colored Women was born. Kansas was represented by Elizabeth Washington from Topeka. By 1900, Kansas had ten different chapters of the Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Club. The biggest and most prestigious was the Gold Leaf chapter in Topeka. The Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs "offered black Kansas women the opportunities for self-expression and education increasingly denied them by white society."⁷⁵

⁷² Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 108.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷⁴ Carol K. Coburn, "Women and Gender in Kansas History," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Great Plains*, (Summer, 2003), 142.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Not a lot of historical research has been done about this national club because of the scarcity of public and personal records. In Kansas, "this problem is alleviated somewhat by the reports of club activities which found their way into black newspapers and national magazines."⁷⁶ The editor of the *Topeka Plaindealer*, Nick Charles, "favored the growth of women's clubs, printed stories about them, and vigorously urged them to concern themselves with domestic science and service to their race."⁷⁷ These clubs were mainly in the large cities, like Topeka and Wichita, but Washington and her members would go to rural areas like Nicodemus and recruit many farm women. Rural women, whether black or white, were very misunderstood when it came to what they did for their families and communities. Women's economic contributions became "subsumed under 'head of household' production records."⁷⁸ These records told little about the actual role that rural women played in the maintenance of "families, farms, ranches, small businesses, schools, hospitals, and social agencies" and all the other things it took to be part of a rural community.⁷⁹

The first of the black women's clubs formed in Kansas was the Ladies Refugee Aid Society, organized in Lawrence in 1864. Another important one was the Coterie, which was established in Topeka in 1889. Like the KFCW the Coterie was composed of the elite of black society. The Coterie was not based on social programs, but on cultural ones. These literary clubs

provided an outlet for the cultural interests of black Topekans. In addition to readings from Shakespeare and Tennyson, the association sponsored lectures, art exhibitions and musicals which were carried off with some sophistication even at home.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Marilyn Dell Brady, "Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, 1900-1930," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Great Plains*, Vol. 20 (Spring, 1986), 20.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Coburn, "Women and Gender," 143.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Coburn, "Women and Gender," 143.

The Plaindealer, on May 18, 1900, reported that “the Negroes of Kansas, like all persons in this and every other civilized country, are aspirants for higher literacy and educational qualifications commensurate with the spirit of the age.”⁸¹ The Coterie, in conjunction with the *Plaindealer*, would sponsor music camps for talented children, and established scholarships for deserving and talented black children.

Politics. Black Kansans fared better at the hands of whites in politics than in any other state. Although they were only six percent of the population, they cast from fifteen to twenty percent of the vote. The political clout of the black population was enhanced “by the fact that it was concentrated in the state’s populous eastern counties. In 1880, one out of every six persons in Topeka and one out of every five in Kansas City was a Negro.”⁸² When a large number of blacks joined the Populist Party they did so “only because Populism directly appealed to their own immediate self-interest, a self interest not shared by whites, through promises of protection and patronage.”⁸³ The black population had since the time of the Fifteenth Amendment always voted Republican. By 1880, there were 43,000 black voters in the state. Kansas Republicans “could ill afford to ignore black voters and politicians.”⁸⁴ Cox, in his book, *Blacks in Topeka*, lists several reasons that blacks were drawn to the Populist Party.

1. Populists opposition to lynching and the brutal convict leasing system, even though those were not an issue in Kansas.
2. Black Populists endorsed the party line exalting the virtues and addressing the problems of labor.
3. Populists viewed the coalition of Republican and monied interest

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁸² Billington and Hardway, *African Americans on the Western Frontier*, 6.

⁸³ Chafe, “The Negro and Populism,” 404.

⁸⁴ Billington and Hardway, *African Americans on the Western Frontier*, 7

as a revocation of the nations' sacred bargain with freed and common men.

4. Populists validly proclaim themselves to be friends of the Negro laborer and advocate the causes of the laboring man throughout.

5. Populists would protect the lives of many helpless blacks even at home.

6. Populists had a more generous black participation in state and municipal politics.

7. The Populists endorsed active black involvement in the political voting Process and partly in access to offices.⁸⁵

The promises proved as false as the ones that convinced the ex-slaves that they would find the Garden of Eden in Kansas. By the 1880s, the black population was becoming disillusioned by the Republican Party and "its indifference and prejudices."⁸⁶ Even so, the black Kansans did "not subscribe to the Populist attacks on the rich and wellborn who in the past had been their most dependable protectors. They were conservatives, not radicals."⁸⁷

However, the race card was always at the forefront of the agenda. Blacks and whites "had a different perception of reality and therefore different definitions of self-interest."⁸⁸ When one considers that the People's Party in the South derived their leadership from the Democratic Party, one can see that equality was not on the table for long. White Democrats and Populist members "promised to abide by the white supremacist ideal that this is a white man's country."⁸⁹ But there was that large black vote to consider. Both white Democrats and white Populists "made election promises to African Americans of

⁸⁵ Cox, Blacks in Topeka, Kansas, 162.

⁸⁶ Chafe, "The Negro and Populism," 402.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 404.

⁸⁸ Chafe, "The Negro and Populism," 416.

⁸⁹ Charles Postel, San Francisco State University, "American Populism, 1876-1896: Populism and Race: Separate and Unequal," (2009 Illinois During the Gilded Age Digitization Project), (<http://dig.lib.edu/gildedage/populism/popessay7.html>), 1.

economic opportunity and other reform.”⁹⁰ In states such as North Carolina it was essential for the Populists to court the black vote so they could overrun the Democrats in the next election. The white populists knew that the black vote could always be counted on to vote against the Democrats. Now all they had to do was get them away from the Republicans.

Conclusion. In this paper I have shown that black communities in Kansas have had a much easier time with racial discrimination than in other states in the Union in the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. I have shown that status in the black community was different than status in the white community. In the black community status was based on “more subtle, intangible forces than occupations and wealth.”⁹¹ The moral way one lived one’s life and membership in community institutions like churches or clubs indicated respectability. “Fulfilling most of these criteria for status and prestige, ascended positions of authority in many organizations and thereby constitutes a leadership elite.”⁹² Kansas also had a high literacy rate for all its citizens, which enabled its black population to be more aware of current events throughout the state and the world. Kansas lay in the wake, not the eye of the Jim Crow storm.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹¹ Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 101.

⁹² *Ibid.*