

The African American Experience



The Kansas Collection
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS LIBRARIES

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

African Americans have always played an active part in the development of Kansas and the region. They first came to Kansas Territory as slaves. Before statehood, both free and enslaved African Americans resided in the area. When the Civil War began, an increasing number of African Americans began migrating to Kansas—some attracted by the area's reputation as a "free" state and others who were seeking refuge from the nation's chattel slave system. After the War, the trickle of African American migrants became a flood as the "Exodusters" came in by the thousands, creating African American settlements such as Dunlap and Nicodemus—the first frontier town established by African Americans in the Trans-Appalachian West. By 1900, however, the majority of African Americans were living in urban areas.

In spite of its claim to be the "grandest, greatest, and freest of all the states in the Union," Kansas has often denied African Americans equal access to employment opportunities and public facilities. Against these odds, African Americans have nevertheless made achievements in many fields. Some served in military units in the State, including "Buffalo Soldier" regiments at Fort Leavenworth, Fort Larned, and Fort Riley. The active participation of African Americans in state politics is exemplified in the election of Edward P. McCabe as Kansas state auditor in 1882, and Alfred Fairfax as a representative in the Kansas Legislature in 1889. Others improved local community life by establishing churches, social welfare institutions, civic organizations, and small businesses. And yet others, such as Aaron Douglas, Langston Hughes, Gordon Parks, and Gwendolyn Brooks, gained national fame in the art and literary world.



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In the struggle to eliminate "Jim Crow" laws and practices, African Americans were the region's leading advocates of racial equality. They played a prominent role in the 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision that outlawed the nation's policy of racial segregation—*Oliver L. Brown et al. vs. the Topeka Board of Education et al.*

After 1954, African American participation in the social, political and cultural life of the region expanded. The greatest number of African Americans ever elected to serve in the Kansas Legislature occurred during the 1970s. In addition to service in virtually all areas and levels of government, African American leadership roles increased in businesses and in a variety of civic, professional, and cultural organizations and agencies. While traditional African American institutions have remained a vital part of local community life, the persistence of color discrimination has engendered the development of new African American organizations. These continuing efforts, by both organized groups and individuals, exemplify the outstanding contributions made to Kansas and the region by African Americans.

WHAT IS THE KANSAS COLLECTION?

The Kansas Collection is the regional history division of the University of Kansas Libraries. Its primary purpose is to support teaching and research at the University through acquiring, preserving, and providing access to historical materials relevant to the history of Kansas, its contiguous states, and the Great Plains.

Users of the Kansas Collection include students and faculty at the University, visiting faculty and students from across the United States and abroad, and the general public. No connection with the University or involvement in formal research is required in order to use the Kansas Collection.

In 1985 the Kansas Collection greatly expanded a collecting program designed to increase opportunities for researchers interested in state and regional African American history, in cooperation with the African and African American Studies Department. In these few years the program has amassed significant resources for African American studies in this region.

HOW WE CARE FOR MATERIALS

The Kenneth Spencer Research Library, in which the Kansas Collection is located, is one of a very few facilities in the region built specifically to give historical materials the safe environment necessary for their protection. The maintenance of constant and appropriate levels of temperature and humidity in the Library is vital to insure the continued availability and use of historical manuscripts, photographs, and books.

Donated materials are arranged, described, and cataloged by Kansas Collection staff, who are trained in the care and preservation of historical materials. As processing goes forward, manuscripts and photographs are placed in archival quality folders and boxes to reduce the risk of deterioration. Individual items that are fragile may be encapsulated in archival polyester to further protect them.

Books and manuscripts are cataloged into a nationwide data base, which makes the resources of the Kansas Collection available throughout the United States and beyond. Manuscripts are also reported to the Library of Congress, for inclusion in the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*, a reference tool available in research libraries across the nation.





WHAT IS NEEDED NOW

We are still looking for personal letters, diaries, speeches, scrapbooks, photographs, and organizational, business, religious and educational records that may be lying forgotten in file drawers, storerooms, basements and attics. The researchers need both the isolated record—a single diary or photograph—and the papers of an entire family, organization or business.

Personal papers often provide information on everyday life not found in more formal sources. Newspapers and published books seldom mention details of daily life, the personal impact of financial conditions, or the way the spoken language was used.

The records of organizations, businesses and institutions are important for the information they contain about the social, economical, political, educational, and religious aspects of a community and of society in general.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Time is running out—we need your help in further documenting the contributions of African Americans to the social, economic and political life of the state and the region. If you have materials that you would like to have preserved in the Kansas Collection, or know of the location of papers or photographs that you think would be of interest, please let us know. A professional staff member is available to visit, examine the materials, advise as to their historical content, and pack and transfer the materials to the Kansas Collection. For further information or to set up an appointment please contact:

Sheryl Williams, Director *or* Deborah Dandridge, Archivist

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