

Invisible History

Preserving the
African-American
Past in Missouri



Missouri Department of Natural Resources
Division of State Parks

Reprinted from *Missouri Resources*, Summer 1997



Printed on recycled paper.

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by Steven E. Mitchell

In 1952, Ralph Ellison, in "Invisible Man," wrote of the dilemma of the post World War II African-American: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me ... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything but me ..." For most white Americans, according to Ellison, African-Americans did not exist as a part of their world, but comprised an invisible community, with its own customs, hierarchy and commerce.

White and black existed in separate worlds, each with its own institutions and culture, often side by side, but legally forbidden to interact.

African-American buildings also were invisible. Usually located outside the official community, in unincorporated hamlets or crossroads communities, or isolated in small enclaves in less desirable portions of towns or cities, these buildings usually were on the fringes of industrial or commercial areas.

"Our state is the legacy of a diverse array of peoples, from prehistoric Native Americans to the Euro-Americans of more recent history," said David A. Shorr, (former) director of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and State Historic Preservation Officer. "The department is committed to recognizing and encouraging the preservation of those reminders of the

An important day in Parkville history was captured on film in 1907 when members of the African-American community dedicated the Washington Chapel C.M.E. Church.





DNR photos by Nick Decker



(Above and cover) Recent photographs of the Washington Chapel C.M.E. church in Parkville reveal a successful restoration effort. (Right) Lucille Douglass helped earn the chapel national recognition and prominence.

accomplishments of all the citizens of Missouri. The cultural legacy of African-American Missourians and their example of perseverance and courage has enriched the history of our state immeasurably.

The buildings and sites that are often the only physical reminders of the history of African-Americans in the state have been identified by DNR's Historic Preservation Program as endangered resources. As early as 1979-1980, a statewide survey funded in part by DNR and conducted by Lincoln University in Jefferson City identified hundreds of buildings associated with African-American history and culture, many of them neglected and unrecognized.

More recently, to encourage the preservation of these resources, properties associated with the state's African-American heritage have been identified by DNR as priorities for its Historic Preservation Fund grants. These matching grants are awarded annually from federal funds distributed to state historic

preservation programs by the National Park Service. The grants may be used to identify historic properties; nominate significant properties to the National Register of Historic Places, the nation's honor roll of buildings and sites significant in American culture and history; and to restore and rehabilitate properties listed in the National Register.

Although their numbers continue to decline, a rich variety of buildings or sites associated with the history of Missouri's African-Americans and their culture remain. Three buildings have received the special distinction of being designated National Historic Landmarks by the National Park Service, an honor reserved for those resources that are important to the heritage of the nation: the Shelley House and the Scott Joplin House in St. Louis, and the Mutual Musicians Union Building in Kansas City. The Shelley House was the focus of a U.S. Supreme Court case that established equal housing opportunity as the law of the land, while the Joplin House is the only building still stand-

ing in the United States associated with the internationally renowned ragtime composer and entertainer Scott Joplin; in addition, the Joplin House is a state historic site operated by DNR. The Mutual Musicians Union Building in the 18th and Vine area of Kansas City is associated with the development of the Kansas City style of jazz.

Other resources identified in historic surveys and in many cases listed in the National Register are of more modest importance, but still represent essential aspects of black heritage.

Most buildings listed in the National Register, the essential first step in receiving consideration for funding for restoration grants, were associated with social or educational institutions; the Shelley and Joplin houses and the Columbia home of John W. "Blind" Boone, also internationally renowned as a pianist and composer, are the only Missouri residences in the state listed for their association with significant African-Americans.

Santa Fe Place Historic District in Kansas City is the only African-American residential district listed in the state and is significant as the first area in the city where middle- and upper-class African-Americans were permitted to settle following the Supreme Court's decision in the Shelley housing case.

Most surviving buildings associated with African-American history in Missouri date from the post-Civil War period. With the end of slavery, Missouri and most other states enacted a series of laws designed to legalize existing practices and principles of segregation. These so-called Jim Crow laws often imposed a more rigid system of behavior and penalties than had existed prior to emancipation. However, the buildings that were constructed in the following 90 years when separation was considered equality also symbolize the triumph of the human spirit over this country's segregated society.

The majority of buildings listed from this period in Missouri are churches and schools. Most





DNR photos by Nick Decker

(Above) Visitors can soon tour Parkville's 110-year-old Benjamin Banneker school. (Right) Gaylon Hoskins' father attended school in Banneker's one classroom. Hoskins is now president of the Banneker School Chapter. (Bottom) Workers found Banneker School's original blackboard during restoration.



African-American churches represent a general movement for separation that blacks favored after the Civil War. Few independent black churches of any denomination existed in the state before the Civil War. In fact, as late as 1856, few had yet to be established west of St. Louis.

A separate church permitted a degree of independence and self-determination not permissible in an integrated body and represented for many blacks a natural extension of their freedom. The black church also served beyond its religious purposes as a community center. Usually located in the heart of the community, the building was typically used for town meetings and for recreational and social activities.

For example, the Free Will Baptist Church of Pennytown in Saline

County was constructed in 1925 to serve a community of freedmen founded near Marshall in 1871 by Joe Penny, a black farmer. Although the decline of the community mirrored the dissolution of American agriculture in the 1930s and 1940s, the church remained as a remembrance of the community and as a symbol of the founders. The late Josephine R. Lawrence of Marshall began efforts to recognize and preserve the Free Will church in 1987.

Lawrence envisioned the church as "a place in Saline County where black history is shared." When she initially wrote DNR, Lawrence stated, "There is just a few of us to work but there is a lot of memories." With the assistance of DNR staff, the church at Pennytown was listed in the National Register the following year. In 1996, with the aid of a Historic Preservation Fund grant, restoration was completed and Lawrence's nine-year-old dream was realized. Her daughter, Virginia Houston, has carried on the legacy: "I say to everyone we meet, we all need to preserve our history – especially our buildings. Now the Pennytown church says to everyone who sees it that we still have roots there, and we are proud of our heritage."

While black churches represented a deliberate effort to seek autonomy, the struggle for education mirrored the long defeat of equality after the

promise of emancipation. On Jan. 11, 1865, the Missouri constitutional convention passed an ordinance that required the immediate emancipation of the state's remaining slaves. In the spring of 1865, the General Assembly rescinded an 1847 constitutional amendment that forbade the education of Missouri's blacks. The following year the assembly enacted a series of measures intended to establish and fund black schools in each township or city. In 1875, separate facilities for the education of whites and blacks were established, a separation that was further defined in 1889 when it was made illegal for African-American children to attend white schools.

The Benjamin Banneker School in Parkville is one of the earliest remaining segregated schools in the state. Constructed in 1885 with the assistance of students and staff of Park College, the one-room brick building served the community until about 1902, when a larger facility was constructed. Later used as a residence, the building was eventually abandoned until local citizens decided to restore and preserve it as a museum. Listed in 1995 in the National Register as a cooperative effort between the Benjamin Banneker Chapter of the Platte County Historical Society and DNR, the building subsequently received preservation



DNR photo by Nick Decker

grants from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and DNR's Historic Preservation Program. As with most African-American buildings in the state, the original impetus to preserve the Banneker School was local. Lucille Douglass led efforts to save both the school and the Washington Chapel C.M.E. Church in Parkville, listed in the National Register through a grant from DNR. According to Douglass, the school, named for a freedman who helped survey and design the nation's Capitol, "represents the visible roots of black people in the community." Gaylon Hoskins, current president of the Banneker School Chapter, observed that the listing of the school "stirred up a lot of interest" in black history in Parkville, and he has been contacted by a number of groups interested in touring some of the historic sites in Platte County.

Hoskins, whose father attended Banneker and whose son, Robert, a teacher, lived in the school after it was converted to a house, views the legacy of segregation represented by the school pragmatically: "It's just part of history ... We want to preserve it because that's just the way it was."

From 1936 to 1943, Forest W. Price attended Lincoln School in Vandalia; in 1947, he graduated valedictorian at Mexico's Garfield High School.

In 1996, the Lincoln School was listed in the National Register through the efforts of Joyce Holman, the Rev. William Givens, and other members of the Concerned Citizens to Save Lincoln School.

For Price and other alumni, the opportunities provided by the Lincoln School – and the courage and dedication of all the members of Vandalia's African-American community – transcended the negative aspects of segregation: "I cannot express the gratitude I feel for the education and social growth experiences Lincoln School, the instructional staff, and the community provided me. The high expectations of the staff and administration were clearly and consistently demonstrated and the caring

expressions of older students and the community combined to motivate us to always strive to do our best academically," Price said.

Listing in the National Register is primarily a tool for the promotion of the preservation of the building or site and provides a focus for larger goals; it is often only the first step in what may be a prolonged process in preserving the building.

For Alice Williams and other former students, listing of the C.C. Hubbard School in Sedalia is a means to inspire alumni of the school across the state and the nation to support

named in his honor. For about 30 years, the Carver School remained a segregated facility, serving the city's African-American children through the eighth grade. Following desegregation, the school housed all of Fulton's sixth-grade children until 1982, when it was closed. In 1989, the building was transferred to the George Washington Carver Memorial Corp., which planned a museum of African-American history and culture in the ground floor classrooms.

More recently, the building has housed the Fulton Family Resource Center, a community service organization, on its upper floor. According



DNR photos by Nick Decker

preservation of the building as a museum and learning center. Listing in the National Register is validation of the importance of their own history and confirmation that they have a place in history. Williams acknowledges the errors of the past and advocates learning from them. "If people forget their history, they are destined to repeat it. By taking a multi-cultural approach to our past, we want to teach all persons and thereby avoid making the same mistakes," she said.

In 1937, African-American scientist George Washington Carver traveled to Fulton from Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to dedicate a school

(Top) For many alumni, the Lincoln School in Vandalia represents the courage and determination of African-Americans to transcend the negative aspects of segregation. (Above) Joyce Holman was instrumental in the Lincoln school being named to the National Register of Historic Places.



DNR photo by Nick Decker

The George Washington Carver school in Fulton has inspired a coalition of African-American alumni and Caucasian students, who attended the school during desegregation, to preserve the building and its rich community history.

to Robert Hickem, director of the center, the Carver School “holds so much historic value to the community ... The community owns the school and wants to be able to teach younger children what [the community] had to go through.” The George Washington Carver School was listed in the National Register in 1996. Hickem admits that in addition to the distinction afforded by recognition by the National Register, the goal of listing was to restore the former school.

Preservation of the building has inspired an interracial coalition. In addition to support from African-American alumni, which always viewed the building as the center of their community, former white students who attended the school during its second life as a desegregated facility have provided support and encouragement. Hickem also has been heartened by a city resolution acknowledging the significance of the school and by assistance to the Family Resource Center from Westminster and William Woods colleges.

Archaeologist James S. Johnson III is dealing with the past both on a professional and personal level. Under a grant awarded by DNR to the Heart of America Boy Scouts Council, he is leading a team of scouts on

a journey into the past, an archaeological survey of the Miller Plantation Site in Kansas City. Part of the Council’s Urban Scouting Program, the five inner-city youths are learning archival research and doing archaeological field work under Johnson.

For Johnson, the project also is a personal odyssey. His great-grandfather was a slave on the Miller Plantation until escaping to Kansas, where he enlisted with the First Kansas Colored Volunteers, the first African-American regiment to see battle in the Civil War. Johnson uses the lessons learned at Miller to instruct his students in the value of differences and as a guide to understanding them. To Johnson, the past represented by the Miller Plantation is only “a point in time that happened ... I’m not mad at anybody because of what happened, we can’t be ashamed of the past and can’t turn back the hands of time. If we don’t recognize that which was, we can’t know the present or what will be.”

Johnson enjoys presenting his findings in lay terms, in “producing a historic painting of 140 or 150 years ago,” he said. Projects that explore the past will, he hopes, inspire children to trace their own ancestry. Johnson has completed one year of

archaeology at the site and has been awarded a second grant for an additional year. With the second year, Johnson’s painting of life on a 19th-century Missouri plantation will be visible on the Internet.

Since 1990, DNR’s Historic Preservation Program has worked with a number of local groups interested in recognizing their community’s black heritage. In the past seven years, 15 buildings that had formerly stood at the center of their communities have been listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and for many of those buildings the listing has engendered a rebirth. More than \$41,000 in grant money has been awarded to restore the Free Will Baptist Church at Pennington and \$4,000 has been awarded to the Benjamin Banneker School at Parkville to prepare plans to begin its restoration. In Liberty, more than 150 African-American properties have been identified and a potential historic district has been nominated for inclusion in the National Register.

For most properties, being listed in the National Register of Historic Places remains the essential first step in preservation of the property. Antonio Holland, a professor of history at Lincoln University and a member of the Missouri Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, agrees that the National Register plays an important role in helping to preserve the state’s African-American heritage, and that listing institutional buildings, such as churches and schools, is especially important. “More people in the black community are affected by churches and schools, so when they are listed in the register it has a greater impact. It can help unify the community,” Holland said.

Holland also believes that efforts to educate the general public are extremely important because “some of these buildings may not be much to look at, but they are more than bricks and mortar. They have an intrinsic value to our history.”

Steven E. Mitchell is assistant director of DNR’s Historic Preservation Program.