

## **The African American Walking Tour**

### **Extension 21 – Introduction**

African Americans first came to Liberty with Southern slave owners from Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina and Virginia. These slaves and their descendents became the pioneers who founded the black community that has been an integral part of Clay County for over 175 years.

The decade before the Civil War was a time of great unrest in western Missouri. Clay County experienced this turmoil over the issues of slavery and free soil states. In 1850, approximately 27% of the residents of Clay County were slaves. Liberty's African-American population at this time comprised just over 20% of the total population. There were only 14 free Blacks in the entire county.

The Missouri legislature passed the slave emancipation act, known as "Manumission Day," ending slavery across the state on January 11, 1865. Black men in Clay County received the right to vote on January 1, 1870. But this was a short lived constitutional right that ended during the Reconstruction era in 1877. African Americans in the United States could not vote again until the Civil Rights laws were passed in 1965.

When Confederate soldiers returned home from the Civil War, they brought prejudices against blacks with them. So deep were passions from the War in Clay County that it was not until 1912 that the United States flag was hoisted above the Clay County Courthouse for the first time in more than 50 years. In spite of Jim Crow laws of segregation and Klan activity, the black community remained an active part of the city.

Before integration and the passing of civil rights laws, living in segregated communities forced blacks to provide small, home-owned "mom and pop" restaurants, entertainment, and community services for the black community. African-American residents in Liberty lived mainly on streets in the old North end of town: Gallatin, Prairie and Grover, and in the south end of town on South Main Street.

## **Extension 22 – Garrison School**

Prior to 1865 it was against the law to teach a slave to read or write. When the Civil War ended, African Americans in Liberty first attended a private school located on West Mill. This school for black and Indian children was in the home of Mrs. Laura Armstrong, a liberal white woman. Later, a series of other homes in Liberty were used. African-American residents established Garrison School in 1877. The first Garrison School building stood until 1910. The current building was built in 1911.

Garrison School, however, only provided its students with a 10th grade education, and the "separate but equal" laws barred them from attending Liberty's white high school. Therefore, many Garrison graduates had to ride buses into Kansas City to attend the all black Lincoln High School. Finally, on May 17, 1954, as a result of arguments in the Supreme Court case Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education, the court ruled "separate but equal education" unconstitutional, and the Liberty School District began to integrate its African American students.

Inside the Garrison School are archives of the Clay County African-American Legacy, Inc, committed to educating and informing the community of the accomplishments of African Americans of Clay County, and how they have influenced and contributed to the rich history of the Northland.

## **Extension 23 – St. Luke AME Church (443 N. Main)**

Rev. Jesse Mills organized St. Luke African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in 1875. The present structure was begun in 1935 and completed in 1942. Dr. John Priest Green, former president of William Jewell College, donated the stone used for the building from his land nearby. Male members of St. Luke quarried stone, and transported the loads by wheelbarrow to the church site. Women mixed mortar and the stones were placed according to Rev. A. G. Thurman's plans. The St. Luke church

building is a Clay County Historical Landmark. In the history of this church, there have been three fires, one caused by lightning, and major damage from the 2003 tornado.

#### **Extension 24 – James A. Gay Home (415 N. Gallatin Street).**

This Colonial Revival Bungalow at 415 N Gallatin St was the home of Professor James A. Gay, a graduate of Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. He was the principal of Garrison School twenty-two years, and the man responsible for naming the school after the great abolitionist and journalist, William Lloyd Garrison. Professor Gay taught Religion, Latin and Greek at Western Bible Baptist College in Macon, Missouri, before the college moved to Kansas City. His close friend, William Jewell College Professor Dr. H. I. Hester, referred Jewell students to Professor Gay for tutoring in Latin and Greek. Professor Gay died at the age of 102 in 1985.

#### **Extension 25 – First Baptist/Mt. Zion Church (336 N. Gallatin)**

As in most communities, churches served as the most important institutions for their members. Not surprisingly, in 1843 slaves were among the first citizens in Liberty to organize a Baptist church under the leadership of Rev. William Brown, a young man less than twenty years of age.

Before the Liberty congregation built a sanctuary, slaves, masters, and free blacks worshipped in the northeast corner of the courthouse, often sharing the communion cup. Later the church moved to an old barn on Missouri Street where they worshipped until the group purchased a lot and built First Baptist/Mt. Zion on Gallatin Street.

#### **Extension 26 – The Lucy Colley Home (403 North Prairie Street)**

This 1890 Gothic Revival house at 403 N Prairie St was the home of Mrs. Lucy Colley, affectionately called “Miss Lucy” by community residents. She was a graduate of

Garrison School, and was the Church Musician and pianist at St. Luke A.M.E. for more than five decades. On her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, she played church hymns on the piano while her friends and family celebrated the occasion at Ashton Court Care Center in Liberty. She died at the age of 100 in January 2007.

Her personal piano, an ornately carved “*Aaron of New York*” walnut wood antique is now on display at Garrison School.

### **Extension 27 – Sam Houston Home (310 N. Gallatin Street)**

This 1903 Folk Victorian House at 310 N Gallatin St, was owned by Sam Houston, one of Liberty’s most outstanding citizens. He was named the 2008 Outstanding Missourian by the Missouri House of the Legislature. His grandparents helped build First Baptist Church, established in 1843. Sam served on the City Council for 18 years and was the first African-American to be so elected. During his tenure, he initiated the first Juneteenth celebration and the first Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday Celebration north of the River, starting in 1984. He has received numerous civic awards. In 1980, Former Missouri Governor Teasdale appointed him to the Commission on Human Rights.

### **Extension 28 – African-American Mural in the Clay County Court House**

Enter the Court House and walk to the third floor. On the long wall at the top of the stairs you will find the African American Legacy Mural to your left. This mural depicts selected early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century African-American pioneers, businesses, churches, and schools, including White Oak Chapel.

The restored Chapel has been relocated to the grounds of Stroud’s near I-35. Also included is the Cemetery from the Fountain Waller Plantation (1836) located on Shady Lane Street, in the “Carriage Hills” subdivision of Gladstone as well as Dr. D.A. Ellett’s Sulpho Saline Bath House and Swimming Pool in Excelsior Springs (1880), the First Baptist Church (1843), Peter Biggs, the first American owner of a barber shop in the “Old West” (1847), and the first African-American School in Missouri City (1877).

## **Extension 29 – The Freedom Fountain (NE corner of the old Courthouse lawn)**

This fountain was erected in 2000 by the Clay County African-American Legacy Inc. in honor of African-Americans who have made contributions to the growth and development of Clay County. The Freedom Fountain is placed near the location where 150 years earlier slaves were regularly bought and sold. For example, in January 1859, \$20,000 worth of slaves was sold on this lawn in one day. The single water fountain for all people reminds Liberty of an earlier era when residents drank from segregated (“white and colored”) water fountains. The June 2000 dedication of this Fountain featured Governor Bob Holden, providing the first drink to Mrs. Lulu Johnson Felder. At age 102, Lulu was the oldest living African-American resident of Clay County. She was born and raised in the first “free” black community in Clay County, “White Oak” in North Kansas City. The church from the community was re-located to the grounds of Strouds’ Restaurant near I-35.