

Historical Notes on the Parkville Banneker School

Slavery and Education for Blacks in Missouri

While the “Jim Crow” Laws and the Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education Supreme Court ruling are often the first two things that come to mind regarding school segregation, the legal history affecting the education of African-Americans in Missouri goes back much further. States where early settlers originated had a strong influence on legal practices here in Missouri, and many of those settlers came from Virginia, bringing their slaves and the laws that applied to slaves with them. In 1804, the “Black Code” (also known as the “Slave Code”), in which slaves and other personal property were considered one and the same, was enacted by the Missouri territorial government. These laws were based on Virginia’s slave code. (1) Fearing rebellion, by 1817, territorial laws were adopted to prevent even free blacks from traveling where they pleased and gathering for meetings. (1) In 1820, Missouri’s status as a slave-holding territory had become a pivotal national issue and when finally admitted to the Union on 10 August 1821, it was as a part of the “Missouri Compromise”, setting in place the status of slavery in future states and foretelling events that led to the Civil War. (1) More and more laws affecting blacks were enacted, including, in 1835, one that bound all free blacks between the ages of 7 and 21 to be apprentices or servants and another that required all free blacks to apply to the county court for a “free license”. (1)

Of course, Platte County, where Parkville is located, was not officially part of Missouri until it was acquired in the 1836 “Platte Purchase”. This region, on the East banks of the Missouri River, was bought by the United States Government from the Native American tribes that were living there at the time. They had been promised that they could keep their land permanently, but were enticed by the new promise of \$7,500, five comfortable houses, 200 acres of broken, fenced land, a farmer, a blacksmith, a teacher, an interpreter, agricultural implements, livestock, and other small items for each tribe. These tribes, the Ioway and the Sac and Fox, agreed to move to reservations which straddle parts of Richardson County, Nebraska and Brown County, Kansas. The ceremony for the land transfer, held at Fort Leavenworth, was presided by the then Superintendent of Indian Affairs, William Clark, of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The acquisition, which briefly made Missouri the largest state in the Union (geographically), encompassed Platte and five other modern counties to the north. It was also in violation of the Missouri Compromise. (2)

In 1846, the constitutionality of the “free-license” law was upheld.(1) However, the law that most discouraged efforts to teach African-Americans was the one passed by the Missouri State Legislature in 1847 which prohibited the education of any black, free or slave.(1) This was done primarily to appease the fears of slave-holders regarding the power of literacy. The legislators were serious and punishments were severe. A fine of not less than \$500 could be levied against anyone operating a school for blacks or teaching reading and writing to a black person, and the violators could be sentenced to up to six months in jail. (3)

While it offered hope to slaves living in Missouri, the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 applied only to those states that had actually seceded from the Union and so Missouri’s slaves were unaffected. (1) However, three weeks before the 13th Amendment to the

Constitution abolishing slavery in the United States was proposed, delegates to the constitutional convention meeting in St. Louis, with only four dissenting votes, passed an ordinance on 11 January 1865 abolishing slavery in Missouri. (1) An indication of Platte County's state of mind is that one of those four no votes came from the Platte delegate, a Mr. Gilbert. (4) The following month, on 20 February 1865, the Missouri General Assembly passed a law requiring all slaves who had "cohabitated as man and wife" to be legally married, thus allowing slave marriages, which had previously not been recorded, to be legally recognized. (1)

On the education front, things were also changing rapidly for African-Americans in Missouri, both those who had been free and those who were newly freed. The first recorded event on the Missouri State Archives "Timeline of Missouri's African American History" about post Civil War education refers to a high school for African Americans set up by the St. Louis-based relief organization for war refugees known as the Western Sanitary Commission, which also provided classes for black soldiers at Benton Barracks in St. Louis.(1) In October of 1865, the Missouri Equal Rights League was organized as the first black political activist movement in the state. Its primary focus was on legal equality, with special consideration for education and voting. (1) On April 16th of 1866, the Lincoln Institute (later known as Lincoln University) was founded by African American soldiers and incorporated as an institution for black students.(1)

Legally, slavery was officially abolished on 16 December 1865 by ratification of the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution; equal protection of the law was provided to all persons by the 14th Amendment ratified on 28 July 1868; and the 15th Amendment, which gave the right to vote to all citizens regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, was ratified on 30 March 1870. (1) These looked good on paper, but true equality was a long way off.

It was probably the 1875 law in the "new" Missouri Constitution that required separate school facilities for black and white children that most prompted the establishment of segregated schools throughout Missouri, (1) including Parkville's Banneker. The law specified that townships with 20 or more black children must provide a separate school for them. (5) In 1889, the Missouri General Assembly mandated separate schools for children "of African descent". (1)

[Note: In the 1870 Census, 49 blacks were found in Pettis Township (Parkville), Platte County who were born between 1854 and 1870 and therefore, of school age. In the 1880 Census, 41 school age children were found. In the 1900 Census, 99 were counted. (5)]

City of Parkville, Missouri and It's Black Residents

George S. Park, a land speculator and entrepreneur, had arrived in the area by the fall of 1837, but spent much of the next two or three years in Texas and Illinois. He did not have possession of the property that was to become Parkville until October 12, 1840, which he acquired thru a long-term lease to get around the fact that claims could not yet be sold (recorded Platte County, Book A, p. 84). A letter written by Rev. Charles Lord on November 29, 1843 to the American Home Missionary Society, described Parkville at that time as "a small landing, just laid out in town lots." The earliest plat, which included only that portion of the land from the river to 7th St. was filed at Platte City on May 13, 1844 and it was not until 10 June 1848 when Park recorded the Patent for the section which included the Banneker property. (7)

In a letter to the American Home Missionary Society in 1853 from George Woodward, the Pastor of the Parkville Presbyterian Church, Woodward responds to questions from the Society regarding the conditions of slavery in Parkville. He describes a relatively benign situation where he notes that the slaves are well-cared for, given freedom to practice religion, and indicates that they mix in well and frequently with the white population. He theorizes “the reason why slavery is so mild here I think arises from the fact that the most of our people are poor and do their own work; hence slaves are not regarded as a low and menial class.” He speaks specifically about the two white members of his congregation who hold slaves, one of them George S. Park. Both acquired their charges through indirect or nontraditional means and both are strongly opposed to the institution of slavery. He reports that Park has taught his slave, Angeline Rucker, to read, which is clearly in violation of the 1847 law enacted by the Missouri State Legislature prohibiting the education of any black, free or slave. (8) Woodward not only wrote freely about Park defying the law, but he also welcomed at least four slaves to officially join the church, married Angeline Rucker to a free black man, William Washington, and baptized their children.

[Note: Even today the Parkville Presbyterian Church remains connected to Banneker, as a number of the parishioners serve in some capacity as members of the Banneker School Foundation Board or its committees.]

The American Home Missionary Society, formed in 1826, financially assisted frontier congregations until they could be self-sufficient, which explains the relationship between the AHMS and Parkville Presbyterian Church. Because so many of the Society’s supporters were Southern slaveholders, they held a “noninterference” position on the subject of slavery. However, due to increasing pressures from the North, where the Society was located and from where most of the contributions came, they adopted an official anti-slavery position in 1857. (9) The letter written by George Woodward was probably a response to a general call for reports on the conditions relating to slavery in the parishes they supported in order to help them decide whether or not to take a stand, one way or another, on the issue.

Meanwhile, Parkville had fallen on very hard times since George S. Park had laid out the plans for the city, with high hopes and great expectations. The turning point had been in 1855, when a pro-slavery mob that opposed to his abolitionist leanings had attacked his printing office in the old Park Hotel, seized his press and other equipment, and carried it to the foot of Main Street, where they had thrown it all into the Missouri River. (10) Fortunately, Park was not in town at the time. He had left Parkville to go to what would later become Manhattan, Kansas just before the press incident. He returned shortly afterward and left May 4th, for Putnam County, Illinois, where he had acquired considerable property in addition to the land he owned in Missouri, Texas and Kansas. During the Civil War, Park divided his time between his homes in Illinois and Parkville, although there were certainly times when his life was in danger here.

By 1866, when T. W. Park (no known relationship with George S. Park), editor of the Platte City newspaper, *The Reveille*, wrote of a visit to Parkville, his impressions were sobering: “Parkville...has seen its best days. Gloom and ruin, decay and desolation, stare at us on every hand.” Any hopes for the once up and coming community to become what Kansas City is today, had been forever wiped out. (11) As Joseph McAfee so well describes in College Pioneering, Parkville’s downfall after the War was due to its inability to adjust to the shift from river traffic and slavery to railroads and free labor. Where Platte County had been credited as being the highest hemp producing county in the nation in 1850 (12), a back-breaking crop but necessary product to make ropes to support life on the river, farmers were no longer able to pay the fair wages required for so expensive a crop. Whites who were able, left the community for a better life elsewhere, and freed slaves, with no education and few skills beyond hemp

and tobacco production, moved into town, hoping for a job that didn't exist. In the dying town, saloons were among the few businesses that flourished. (10)

Donald Parker, in his article, "The Colored Community of Parkville" (not dated but believed to have been written in the 1930s or 1940s,) notes that many of Platte County's now free blacks moved across the river to Leavenworth, Kansas following the Civil War, partly in response to the rumor that "the government was intending to give every Negro in Kansas forty acres and a mule". Whether this promise was ever fulfilled is unknown, but the popularity of this destination is upheld by population shifts shown in the 1870 and 1880 Federal Censuses. For a number of years, we see Platte County black families making the move from Missouri to Kansas, and often back again to Missouri. (13) Parker comments that in the early years following the War, blacks lived "scattered among the white population" in Parkville. This is confirmed by the census records and Rev. Woodward's correspondence.

When Dr. John A McAfee arrived to establish the Park College in 1875, he brought seventeen students with him. What they faced was a truly daunting task. This was no idyllic oasis of learning like the Ivy League icons of New England or the grand campuses of the South. By then, George S. Park's dreams for Parkville had been shattered and the town was in shambles. Warehouses and businesses which had once been bustling were abandoned, boarded up, or falling down. The rutted dirt streets were littered with no less than three safes, pulled there by bank robbers who came to scavenge what little savings there might have been and left for citizens to use to mount their horses. Residents who remained held on to bitter memories of the times before the War, when business was good and slave labor supported the thriving economy based on hemp, tobacco, and river trade, and, blamed the current state of affairs on their neighbors who held opposing viewpoints on the causes of the great conflict. (12) By 1875, when John McAfee arrived, Park had moved his family to Illinois and the town was run down and worn out. (10)

The former slaves, now free, were challenged with overwhelming needs to support themselves and their families and while no longer at the mercy of their masters, were sometimes victimized by even more ruthless forces. Because of years of legal prohibitions, most were illiterate and uneducated and had few skills for gainful employment in this new economy. Because Missouri had never had the large numbers of slaves as in the deep South, there were no services, such as the Freedman's Bureau, to help them learn how to navigate in this new condition of freedom. But help had arrived for many when John McAfee and his students moved into the old, dilapidated Park hotel on the river front.

McAfee brought with him, not only students with eager minds, strong backs and willing hands, but he had a new concept of education based on faith and hard work; "Fides et Labor" remains Park University's motto yet today. The first task for the students was to repair and convert the old Park Hotel on the river front into a functioning college. As more students arrived to join the original seventeen, the campus expanded to the neighboring hillside and the old building was dismantled, many of its stones and other components to find another purpose in new structures on the upper campus and in the community.

Dr. McAfee had developed a close friendship with a gentleman across the river in Quindaro, Kansas, known as "Father Blatchley", who was inspired to build "an institution of higher learning" for the blacks who had moved from their former homes in Missouri to the more welcoming state of Kansas. Influenced by his friend's lofty intentions, Dr. McAfee took a special interest in the Negroes of his own community in Parkville and hoped to find a way to improve their lives and opportunities. (14) And, so, he actively sought out unemployed local blacks to work with his student laborers, who were by virtue of

“Fides et Labor” expected to work at least half a day in some capacity to support the college’s various functions. (14)

Tasks to which these new employees were assigned included grading the campus, caring for the orchard, cutting trees, tending the nursery, and hauling coal. (13) Unfortunately, as early building objectives were achieved and maintenance needs could be met by the growing number of students, the job opportunities for Parkville blacks decreased and the local population statistics show the migration of African-Americans from Parkville to Kansas City, Leavenworth, Chicago, Nebraska, and other Northern States in the 1900s. Parker references a statistic from Spencer Cave that in the 1890s, Parkville was home to as many as 250 blacks. Unfortunately, we have no 1890 Census to confirm that fact, but Parker claims that in 1900, Parkville was home to 204 colored persons. (13)

In 1937, the Park College Board of Trustees awarded a pension to Spencer Taylor Cave, believed to be the first black hired at Park, for his years of service to the school and for befriending decades of students. Cave lived another ten years and died on 21 June 1947 in Parkville, which had been his home since sometime in the 1870s. His legend lived on for many more years as new generations of students came to know his name. (15) Another early Park employee from the local black community was Steve Carter. Joseph McAfee writes of the initial conflicts when assigning students, especially those who came from the South, to work alongside black employees and how these students came to respect and appreciate their work colleagues. (15)

[Note: the children of both Spencer Cave and Steve Carter attended Banneker School.]

However, Dr. McAfee had much greater aspirations than merely employing African Americans – he wanted to educate them in the same manner in which he offered educational opportunities to white students unable to afford the tuition and room and board of a more traditional campus. His dream was of a “Negro annex” to Park College, built so close that the two campuses could share instructors and staff – after all, this was Missouri, where at that time it was illegal for black and white students to use the same facility. In anticipation of this new venture, he began, under the auspices of the Park College Board of Trustees, to purchase land in the northwest part of Parkville where many of the black residents lived, as parcels became available at reasonable prices. Unfortunately, he never realized his dream. (16) It is unlikely it would have been successful, at least not initially. It was a worthy goal, but since neither the parents nor the children had had the advantages of even the most rudimentary education, starting at the college level was unrealistic. What the Parkville black community needed immediately was an elementary school!

And so, on 13 July 1885, School District No. 16, Township 51, Range 34, Platte County, Missouri (or, more simply, Parkville School District) purchased Lots (30), (31), and the East half of (32), in Block (30), in the town of Parkville, in Platte County, Missouri from the estate of Wm. McNeill Clough, deceased, for the grand sum of \$15. (6) On this small piece of property, on the south side of 8th St. and east of West St. in Parkville, the first Banneker School was built of bricks made on the Park College campus. This would have put Parkville about 10 years behind the “new” Missouri constitution requirement to provide a separate school in communities where 20 or more black children of school-age lived, but predated the 1889 mandate by the Missouri General Assembly to provide schools for children of “African descent” by four years. (1)

(to be continued)

The Title Abstract shows the sale of the property by the Parkville Board of Education, and signed by the Board President, Lowell M. McAfee, son of John A. McAfee, on 31 March 1903. (17) The sale of the property indicates the closure of the first Banneker school and the opening of the second, a two-room building, which was eventually wired for electrical lights. In 1907, the Washington Chapel CME Church was built next to Banneker II. The church, which served much of the Parkville black community, is still active and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

(Note: The Notary Public, J. T. McRuer, who certified the sale of Banneker I is the great grandfather of the Banneker School Foundation's Treasurer, Scott McRuer.)

Once the building was obviously too small and a second, larger building was built, the first Banneker was purchased by the _____ family it and it was remodeled as a home, which entailed adding a fireplace, changing the location of the main entrance to the side of the building, altering windows, and building a partition to divide the kitchen from the main living room. The basement afforded more living space and a detached garage/storage building was constructed at some time.

1. Missouri State Archives; Timeline of Missouri's African American History:
<http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/africanamerican/timeline/timeline6.asp>
2. "Platte Purchase", Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platte_Purchase
3. Gary R. Kremer and Antonio F. Holland, *Missouri's Black Heritage*. Rev. ed., (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993), p. 38.
4. Nathan H. Parker, *The Missouri Handbook*, 1865, p. 24.
5. Robert Brigham, "The Education of the Negro in Missouri," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1946, p. 83.
6. Calculated from Ancestry.com

7. Abstract of Title to Lots 31-32-33 & 34, Block 30, An Addition to Parkville, Platte County, Missouri for Board of Trustees of Park College, Parkville, Missouri, p. 23.
8. Letter from Pastor George S. Woodward of Parkville Presbyterian Church on Parkville blacks , dated 10 Mar 1853
9. American Home Missionary Society, Amistad Research Center
<http://www.amistadresearchcenter.org/archon/?p=creators/creator&id=11>
10. Joseph Earnest McAfee, *College Pioneering*, Kansas City, Missouri, Alumni Parkana Committee, 1938, pp.21-23.
11. T. W. Park, Editor of *The Reveille*, Platte City, August 16, 1866, Vol. 1, #7, p. 3.
12. N. Parker, p. 141.
13. Donald Parker, with assistance of Spencer Cave, "The Colored Community of Parkville" , p. 1. (believed to have been written in the 1930s or 1940s)

14. McAfee, pp. 202-203.
15. McAfee, p. 203.

16. McAfee, p. 204.

17. Abstract of Title, p. 24 (Warranty Deed, Book 51, p. 303)