A Long Struggle for Freedom and Equality

One hundred years of Kansas history separates John Brown’s war on slavery and the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in Brown v. Board of Education that ended racial segregation in the nation’s public schools. John Brown’s involvement in Bleeding Kansas set the spark that ignited the Civil War that freed millions of enslaved human beings. Brown v. Board of Education fixed the opening shots in the Civil Rights Movement determined to end the second class citizenship assigned to African Americans. Just as Brown’s death on the gallows inspired abolitionists, the Brown decision lit the spark of hope in a generation of men and women who struggled for equality across the nation.

Kansas – A Free or Slave State?

In 1854, the U.S. Congress passed the Kansas–Nebraska Act. The nation was divided between those in the north, largely opposed to slavery, and those in the south wanting its expansion westward. Residents in each of these territories were to decide whether to enter the Union as a free or slave state. While Nebraska was in little danger of becoming a slave state, the Kansas Territory, bordering pro-slavery Missouri, became a prize of contention by both sides. The stage for the turbulent era called Bleeding Kansas was set by a March 1855 election riddled with fraud and intimidation. This election established a pro-slavery territorial government in Lecompton. Seeing that their new state might allow slavery, northerners gathered in Topeka in October. They formed a free state government in Constitution Hall and wrote the Topeka Constitution, stating “there shall be no slavery in this state.” Militia on both sides quickly organized. The famous John Brown mural, Tragic Prelude, by John Steuart Curry is on the second floor of the Kansas Statehouse. Brown is depicted in all his fury, arms outstretched, holding a Bible in one hand and a Sharpe’s rifle in the other. Beside him are escaping slaves whom he helped smuggle through Topeka on the Underground Railroad. Topeka settlers, like John and Mary Jane Ritchie, defied the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and turned their properties into sanctuaries for escaping slaves.

Today, historic sites in Topeka link the dramatic events of Bleeding Kansas, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement. Walls in the footsteps of John Brown and others who turned their properties into havens for fugitive slaves on their journey to freedom. Learn about immigrants from faraway lands hoping for a better life. Remember civil rights activists who fought to force open the schoolhouse doors for children of all races. These people and stories are part of the continuing struggle to secure the American dream and basic rights for all citizens.

One City, Many Languages

The trickle of African Americans into the city in the years after the Civil War turned into a flood. Southern blacks fled the poverty and violence of the former slave states seeking a better life in Kansas. Eastern European Jews and Catholics also fled their homelands and made their way to Kansas. They often stepped off the train carrying only a few personal belongings and a badge with their name. Escaping the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution and lured by the prospect of jobs with the Santa Fe Railroad locomotive shops, Hispanics arrived in ever greater numbers. The Topeka Cemetery reflects this diversity. The gravesite of Sam Sciotopolsky, who arrived alone in Topeka in 1899 and began his new life as a street peddler, can be seen alongside those of Topeka’s founders, including Cyrus K. Holliday, and Kansas governors, such as Arthur Capper.

Confined by the surroundings of their new home, community became important for Topeka’s newest residents. Neighborhoods with names such as “Tennessee Town,” “Little Russia,” and “Little Mexico” sprang up. As these communities grew, houses of worship were built. Celebrations such as Fiesta Mexicano and Emancipation Day became annual events. While conditions were improved from their native lands, the newcomers quickly found that Topeka was not without problems. Some groups, particularly African Americans and Mexican Americans, were subjected to varying degrees of discrimination. Local lunch counters would only sell food “in a sack” that had to be taken outside to be eaten. People of color could walk into any white-owned movie theater in town, but they would be escorted to a small section of seats in the balcony. While there were no signs forbidding minorities from using the swimming pools at the city parks, it was understood that pools were for whites only.
Equality in Education

Perhaps nowhere in Topeka was the color line more entrenched and more obvious than in its public schools. In 1880, segregation was challenged when two young girls were denied admission to the all-white City Street School and sent instead to the then all-black South High School. In 1888, Topeka's African American community initiated six legal actions to integrate Topeka's schools. Their only success came in 1912 when the Supreme Court overturned the city's junior high schools. As Topeka's African American parents took their fight into the courtroom, the Hispanic community also united to end the segregation of their children through the fourth grade in the Bruner School Annex. Protecting the separation of their children was "American," the parents noted. The crisis? The Topeka Board of Education closed the Bruner School Annex in August of 1912.

The state law allowing Topeka to maintain a dual school system in the elementary grades remained on the books, so long as the schools remained "separate but equal." This was upheld in the 1954 cases until the Brown v. Board of Education decision. If the Supreme Court decision was in effect, the case brought an end to racial segregation in America's schools with the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1954.

Locations Contact Information:

1. Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site
   1915 SE Monroe Street
   (785) 293-4273
   www.nps.gov/brow and www.facebook.com/brownboardelps
   The only national park named after a U.S. Supreme Court case, and
   located in the former all-black Monroe School.

2. Mamie Williams House
   1063 SE Quincy Street
   Built in 1920 by her father, this home served as the lifelong
   residence of Topeka teacher Mamie Williams.

3. The Historic Ritchie House
   1116 SE Madison Street
   (785) 293-6097
   www.jamesneverscountryhistory.org
   The home and Malachi House told the story of Topeka from its
   founding to the Brown v. Board of Education decision through the
   eyes of those who lived it.

4. Buchman Elementary School
   540 SW Buchanan Street
   An all-black elementary school built in 1885, Buchman served the
   children of Topeka's historic Tennessee Town neighborhood.

5. Charles Curtis House Museum
   1101 SW Topeka Boulevard
   (785) 327-1371
   www.charlescurtismuseum.com
   Charles Curtis served as a U.S. Congressman, U.S. Senator, and in
   1933 became the first Native American to hold the office of
   Vice President of the United States.

6. Kansas Statehouse
   915 SW Jackson Street
   www.kslegislature.org
   Constructed between 1886 and 1903, the State Capitol is the
   home of the State's John-Darby Curvy painting. Provocative, featuring
   John Brown.

7. First Washburn University School of Law
   118 SE 8th Avenue
   Today focusing a popular Topeka nylon, the third floor of the
   building was the home of the Washburn Law School from
   1903 to 1911.

8. Constitution Hall
   405 S Kansas Avenue
   www.kansasconstitutionhall.org
   In 1855, Free State delegates assembled in Constitution Hall and
   drafted the Topeka Constitution declaring, "There shall be no
   slavery in this State."

9. Old Federal Building
   404 S Kansas Avenue, #1
   (785) 293-8711
   Dedicated in 1934, the Brown v. Board of Education case was
   argued in the third floor courtroom.

10. Topeka Cemetery
    1601 SE 10th Avenue, #1
    (785) 213-4121
    www.topekacemetery.org
    Established in 1859, the cemetery is the resting place for Kansas
    governors, and others, including civil War veterans.

11. Summer Elementary School
    330 SW Western Avenue
    www.ks.gov/ksdis/travelpages/preservation.html
    One of 18 elementary schools established for Topeka's white
    children during the time of the Brown decision.

12. St. Mark's AME Church
    1136 S Harrison Street
    Officer Brown, lead plaintiff in the Brown v. Board of Education case,
    pastored St. Mark's from 1952 to 1959 and was in the church when
    he received word they had the case.

13. St. Markland Station
    791 N Kansas Avenue
    (785) 293-9533
    www.stmarklandstation.com
    The station, which opened in 1927 as part of the Union Pacific line,
    has been restored and today serves as a museum.

14. Our Lady of Guadalupe Church
    2021 NE Chandler Street
    www.olgp-parish.org
    Built in the heart of Topeka's Hispanic community, the Church's
    Maricar Ballet teaches the story of the church's history.

15. The Great Reading Wall of Topeka
    2041 SE Washington Avenue
    Topeka students, working with artists, turned a building formerly
    housing a water reservoir into a canvas celebrating Topeka's history.

16. Kansas Historical Society
    6425 SW 6th Avenue
    (785) 293-8681
    www.kshs.org
    The museum features exhibits, artworks, and artifacts telling the
    story of the state from prehistoric times to the present.

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Greater Topeka Chamber of Commerce
120 SE 6th Avenue, Suite 106
Topeka, KS 66603-2151
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www.topekachamber.org
Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area
116 SE 4th Street
Lawrence, KS 66044
(785) 856-5169
www.freedomfrontier.org