

**Landscape of Faith:
Black Churches in Wabaunsee County, Kansas, 1881-1981
and
The Black Baptist Church in Eskridge, Kansas, 1887-1963**

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Christianity has been a central part of the African-American experience since Southern slaveholders sought to use it as one more means of control over their chattel property. Where plantation owners focused on passages that supported slavery and encouraged obedience to a master, their slaves found meaning in the story of Moses, who led enslaved Israelites to freedom. As spirituals played an integral role in the operation of the Underground Railroad and provided comfort during a bloody civil war, it was only natural that Christianity would be a significant component for blacks beginning new lives as freedmen. For the first time, former slaves were able to organize formal churches, first meeting in houses and later building churches in the South. The end of Reconstruction created a much more dangerous landscape for newly freed blacks, though, and many moved north to escape political persecution from Democrats and terrorism from the Ku Klux Klan.

In particular, the Baptist and Methodist faiths played central roles in the experience of black freedmen building their own churches immediately after the Civil War. Most studies on the character of black Protestant churches focus on the black branches of the Baptist church, as well as the African Methodist Episcopal tradition. During the 19th century, Baptist and Methodist missionaries traveled to plantations throughout the South, focusing their conversion efforts on slaves.¹ Slaveholders accepted these efforts, often as another means of indoctrination or social control of their property, and at first allowed slaves to attend services with them. However, as church attendance by slaves increased, separate services were held in the same church building at different times, setting the stage for a racial split in both these congregations that became permanent after the Civil War.²

¹ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, "In the Receding Shadow of the Plantation: A Profile of Rural Clergy and Churches in the Black Belt," *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (June 1988): 352.

² Walter H. Brooks, "The Evolution of the Negro Baptist Church," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (January 1922): 13-15.

Both the Baptist and Methodist denominations contained elements that were particularly attractive to slaves transitioning into a new cultural identity as African-Americans instead of just Africans in the early 1800s. For blacks who became Baptists, many elements of their new religion were reminiscent of African religious practices, including the idea of being born again and having intense spiritual visions.³ Jubilant music and group singing were also important parts of Baptist meetings, which fit naturally with the development of slave spirituals.⁴ The popularity of Methodism among slaves is owed more to historical circumstances than the nature of the denomination's practices. From the time John Wesley began lecturing in England in the 1720s, Methodists expressed fervent opposition to slavery, reaffirming these ideas continuously throughout the following decades and increasing the appeal of their religion to enslaved black Americans.⁵ The African Methodist Episcopal Church became the first separate black denomination in the United States when it was formed in 1787 by black worshippers who were forced out of a Philadelphia church service because of their race.⁶

As blacks migrated north, they took their churches with them, using their religion to provide stability and help them cope.⁷ The continuing importance of these black churches, especially the two mainline denominations, can be at least partially explained by the effects of segregation. Stripped of broader means of recognizing achievement, blacks found security and appreciation within their own church services, which had been segregated even before emancipation.⁸ The assessment of black churches as "the central institution of the African-American community

³ Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 101.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 49-50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, "Shadow of the Plantation," 350.

⁸ Matthew O. Hunt and Larry L. Hunt, "Regional Religions?: Extending the 'Semi-Involuntary' Thesis of African-American Religious Participation," *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (December 2000): 571-572.

in the rural South” underscores their importance anywhere in the U.S.⁹ The role of the church in black community life would continue to be vital as blacks migrated to Kansas from the South, especially as they worked to find a place within settled white communities.

From 1870 to 1880, the black population of Kansas increased by more than 26,000 people.¹⁰ The year 1879 alone saw an unprecedented wave of migration as 6,000 blacks took part in the Kansas Fever Exodus.¹¹ As freedmen moved north, they took their familiar institutions with them. Churches provided a central gathering and discussion place for many frontier communities, and early black churches in Kansas were certainly no exception. However, a search of academic journals and books reveals how little scrutiny the subject has received. “Early Kansas Churches,” a 1947 article by Edward R. Dezurko, contains no mention of early black churches in Kansas.¹² A more recent article by Philip R. Beard analyzes the efforts of white Presbyterian churches in organizing a school in Dunlap, Kansas, an Exoduster colony, but it does not make mention of any church efforts organized by the settlement’s residents.¹³ These articles are prime examples of how early black churches in Kansas have not been included or examined. Historians have overlooked the significance of churches for black communities in Kansas and therefore ignored a meaningful piece of daily life. The history of the black Baptist church that was organized by Exodusters living in Eskridge, Kansas – a rural community of no more than 500 people in the eastern part of the state – illustrates the importance these churches held in community life.

⁹ Ibid., 571.

See also: Benjamin Elijah Mays and Joseph William Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1933).

¹⁰ Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), 146.

¹¹ Ibid., 184.

¹² Edward R. Dezurko, “Early Kansas Churches,” *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 6, No. 1/2 (January-June 1947): 22-29.

¹³ Philip R. Beard, “The Kansas Colored Literary and Business Academy: A White Effort at African-American Education in Late Nineteenth Century Kansas,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Autumn 2001): 200-217.

Black Communities in Wabaunsee County

Eskridge itself is located in Wabaunsee County, a sparsely populated region where an abundance of native limestone is still used to build fences on cattle ranches, the county's dominant industry. Neighboring Shawnee County is home to Topeka, site of the state capitol and a number of early black neighborhoods, as freedmen chose to settle there. Even before 1879, the city's black population was increasing substantially, as there was a 470 percent increase in the number of black residents from 1865 to 1870 and a 53 percent increase from 1870 to 1875.¹⁴ The oldest black church organization in Topeka met in 1865 as the Second Baptist Church, and as the influence of black churches grew with their number, Wabaunsee County churches would frequently rely on ministers and pastors from Topeka during uncertain economic times.¹⁵ Wabaunsee County churches facing rapidly declining membership often hired ministers from Topeka to preach on a part-time basis, and churches extended cross-county invitations of hospitality. One such event was announced at a 1966 meeting of Graves Chapel AME Church in Paxico, as members of Lane Chapel in Topeka invited Paxico church members to a "Mammoth Tea."¹⁶

The dearth of scholarship on black churches in rural Kansas makes recovery of information more difficult for researchers. Census records can provide preliminary information about the feasibility of a black church in the Eskridge area. The 1895 Kansas State Census indicates 57 black residents of Eskridge, 10.3% of the city's population. Wilmington Township, where Eskridge is located, recorded 89 blacks in addition to those living within city limits, 12.2% of the township's rural population. The inclusion of black residents of neighboring Mill Creek and Mis-

¹⁴ Thomas C. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas, 1865-1915* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

See also: Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-80* (Lawrence, Kan.: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978).

¹⁶ Paxico AME Church document, 1966. Copy available at Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

sion Creek townships brings the maximum number of potential members of a black church in Eskridge to 305, more than a third of the county's black population at the time. These figures warrant further investigation into black church membership, and land records and newspaper articles can provide quantifiable information on dates and locations. Though no formal institutional records can be found, artifacts such as a cornerstone tucked away in the corner of a church basement and interviews with surviving members of the church offer meaningful glimpses into the past that bare facts alone cannot illustrate.

Stories of thousands of former slaves flooding the state present only a small part of the picture in Wabaunsee County. Migration into the state was concentrated at Wyandotte, the next destination for Exodusters who traveled up the Mississippi River to St. Louis.¹⁷ For those who kept moving west, Topeka became home to a number of black neighborhoods. Exodusters did not start settling in rural areas to homestead in earnest until 1880, with the establishment of a colony in the southwest corner of Wabaunsee County.¹⁸ By 1885, there were 764 blacks living in the county, with many choosing to live in or near developing towns.¹⁹ Alma Township, named for the future county seat, had 179 black residents; Newbury Township, which was home to Paxico and perhaps the county's earliest black church, recorded 121 black inhabitants; and Wilmington Township, with rapidly growing Eskridge, topped the list with 134 blacks living in its boundaries.²⁰ Further boosting the Eskridge region's numbers, neighboring Mill Creek and Mission Creek townships each reported more than 70 black residents. Land records and newspaper accounts indicate that at least one black church was operating in each of these areas just a mere six

¹⁷ Glen Schwendemann, "Wyandotte and the First 'Exodusters' of 1879," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Autumn 1960): 233.

¹⁸ "New Branches from Old Trees": *A New History of Wabaunsee County* (Alma, Kan.: Wabaunsee County Historical Society, 1976), 873.

¹⁹ Kansas State Census, 1885. Microfilm available at Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kan.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

years after the Fever Exodus. By 1895, blacks made up 10-15% of the total population in Alma, Wilmington, Newbury, and Mill Creek townships, with the number of black residents in the entire county increasing slightly to 813.²¹

However, the 1925 state census paints a different picture. The county's black population had decreased to 451, and this decline can be traced most drastically in the county's towns.²² Alma and its surrounding township had only 93 black residents, with Eskridge and Wilmington Township reporting a combined total of 83. The Paxico area actually reported an overall increase with 145 black inhabitants. This change can be most easily attributed to the development of the Rock Island railroad, a line that brought prosperity to Paxico, McFarland and Maple Hill. County land records indicate that many black farmers sold their land and moved into town around the turn of the century, with several starting to work on railroad lines.

This link, though temporarily beneficial, ultimately led to the end of large black communities in Wabaunsee County, as many single black men left the county during the agricultural depression of the 1920s and '30s for work in the rail yards of Topeka and Kansas City.²³ Other black men left during the two world wars to work in defense plants in other Midwestern cities like Wichita.²⁴ A strong connection remained between those who left Wabaunsee County, though, as pickups full of black Topeka and Kansas City residents would come to the county for its annual Emancipation Jubilee each August 1.²⁵ The creators of a 1928 "Colored Directory" for Topeka took care to list black residents and businesses from other nearby communities, and Eskridge, Alma, and Paxico are all prominently featured in the booklet.²⁶

²¹ Kansas State Census, 1895. Microfilm available at Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kan.

²² Kansas State Census, 1925. Microfilm available at Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kan.

²³ Louis Carlton Thompson, "A History of the Paxico Community: Wabaunsee County, Kansas." Master's Report for Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Science, 1953, 49.

²⁴ Tony Meseke, interview by author, written notes, Alma, Kansas, 24 April 2009.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Colored Directory*, Topeka, Kansas, April 1928. Digital copy available online at www.kansasmemory.org.

Black Churches in Wabaunsee County

The Baptist church in Eskridge is representative of several other black churches that developed across Wabaunsee County in the late 1800s after the Kansas Fever Exodus. The county's popularity as a settlement point might stem from its location as part of the Underground Railroad during the Civil War. There were two stations operating in Wabaunsee County during this period – one in the northwest part of the county at the town of Wabaunsee, which was founded by abolitionists, and one at Mission Creek in the eastern part of the county.²⁷ The stations were located about 30 miles apart, and escaped slaves traveling between the two would have become well acquainted with the county's people and the abundance of inexpensive ground in the area. As black farmers quickly discovered that the area's rocky ground was not suitable for a 40-acre farm designed to sustain a family, many began to move into or near existing towns. This led to the establishment of churches in Alma, Eskridge, and Paxico – population centers that could support two black churches.

Eskridge

In addition to the Baptist church, Eskridge also had an AME congregation. Addie Swagerty, who was the daughter of Exodusters, reminisced about the city's black churches in an interview conducted shortly after her 90th birthday in July 1977. Her own family belonged to the AME congregation, but Swagerty stated that the Methodist and Baptist congregations “alternated Sunday services” using a former grade-school building as their primary location during her childhood.²⁸ Potluck dinners and hymn-singing sessions were frequent occurrences for both

²⁷ Dorothy Hoobler, “She’s a ‘Yankee Doodle Dandy,’” *Eskridge Independent*, 21 July 1977, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

churches, and some meetings were held jointly. The AME congregation eventually built its own church in the city, but there is no record of its existence after the 1920s.

Paxico

The distinction of having the earliest black church in Wabaunsee County might go to the settlement of Old Paxico. This area, which was located about a mile east of the current townsite, was located on the banks of a creek near a mill, and settlers in the area soon produced enough wheat to help the mill flourish. Subsequently, a stone school house was constructed in the winter of 1879-80, and the “Mill School” became a cultural center.²⁹ The first blacks associated with the Paxico community arrived in 1881, and as former slaves continued to come to the region, the Mill School was used for church meetings that “could be heard for a mile.”³⁰ Sharing of resources continued to be a common theme for black congregations in Paxico decades later. As the black population first began to dwindle in the 1910s and ‘20s, the churches agreed to hire one pastor who took turns preaching in each congregation’s building.³¹ Churchgoers were creative in making sure the pastor’s sermons were heard by as many people as possible, removing windows in the two buildings on warm summer days so both congregations could enjoy the sermons that carried “for half a mile on a clear day.”³²

The first formal church in the current town of Paxico was established in 1887 after the majority of residents voted to establish a Methodist church.³³ King Officer, an Exoduster who had recently moved to Paxico from Alma, was one of the first trustees of the church that later

²⁹ Thompson, 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Vida Wrench Lannan, *Paxico: Our Little Town* (Manhattan, Kan.: Ag Press, 1986), 30.

became known as the “white Methodist church.”³⁴ Both the black Baptists and Methodists sought out their own buildings two years later, with the Baptists forming a Missionary Baptist congregation and the Methodists creating an AME congregation.³⁵ At first, the Baptists met in a building not far from the homes of the first black settlers in Paxico.³⁶ In 1903, the church sold its original property to build a new building three blocks further north.³⁷ Though church activities continued for the better part of twenty-five years, membership eventually decreased in the 1920s to the point that the church was closed and razed, with the lumber being sent to help build a new black church in Topeka.³⁸

The Paxico AME church enjoyed a longer existence, though its early survival seems to have been somewhat dependent on both the black Baptist church in Paxico and the AME church in Eskridge. In addition to early ties to the local Baptist congregation, one local historian wrote that the Paxico AME church was “combined with the Black church at Eskridge,” with the pastor choosing where he wanted to stay from week to week.³⁹ The congregation eventually became large enough to support its own minister on a permanent basis, though exactly when this change occurred is unclear. The first building used specifically as an AME church building in Paxico was a barn in the north part of town, in the same block as the original black Baptist church and near the first homes of Exodusters.⁴⁰ This building was used for services from 1889 until 1904, when David and Cicero Officer, sons of King Officer, built a new AME church building, which

³⁴ Doug Heigert, “Black Population of Paxico,” *Stories of the Past: The Third Edition of Wabaunsee County History* (Alma, Kan.: Wabaunsee County Historical Society, 2000), 427.

³⁵ Katherine Bradley, interview by August Safry, Paxico, Kansas, 14 June 1983. Audio recording available at Wabaunsee County Historical Society, Alma, Kansas.

³⁶ Heigert, 427.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Lannan, 30.

³⁹ Heigert, 428.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

became known as Graves Chapel CME Church.⁴¹ The new building bore a resemblance to other black churches in the region, though the Officer brothers added some finishing touches that helped make it distinctive. Six side windows contained patterned frosted glass, while the showy front window featured both stained and frosted glass, and a bell tower was attached to the south-east corner of the building, as seen in Figure 1.⁴²



Figure 1. Paxico CME Church, date unknown. Built in 1904, this church building featured several decorative touches, including a bell tower. SOURCE: Vida Wrench Lannan, *Paxico: Our Little Town*.

Church records and newspaper accounts indicate that the Methodist congregation was an extremely active one. As early as December 1888, the *Paxico Courier* reported that the local AME church was hosting a festival with contests and games in a local general store, with proceeds going to the church.⁴³ A fundraising supper in May 1889 for the black Baptist church raised \$10 with tables that “fairly groaned” with the amount of food prepared.⁴⁴ Similar events took place periodically through the work of a women’s Missionary Society, which raised funds

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 427-428.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 427.

to send abroad for mission programs and also to help members of its own church.⁴⁵ Holiday events, ice cream socials and potluck dinners were popular activities, as were meetings of two separate choirs – one for the “young folks” and one for the “old folks.”⁴⁶

Attendance at these church events was not limited to black residents, as Paxico merchants often came to services to promote their own stores. One prominent local businessman, Otto Glotzbach, was a practicing Catholic but frequented both the black Baptist and Methodist churches in Paxico.⁴⁷ When he arrived fashionably late to services, pastors would supposedly stop their sermons to welcome the Glotzbach family and promote the family’s store, all in return for a hearty donation to church funds.⁴⁸

Though demographic changes eventually led to the Paxico AME church’s closure, church activities continued well into the 1950s and ‘60s. By World War II, the church could no longer support a full-time pastor, hiring a preacher from Topeka to visit on selected Sundays.⁴⁹ Minutes of a February 1957 church meeting reveal that eighteen members contributed to the offering, while members attending a May meeting the same year elected a delegate for the annual Emancipation Jubilee in the county and reported a total of \$16.03 raised from a recent barbecue.⁵⁰ The church was still holding formal services as late as November 1966, with eleven elders representing many of the founders of the town’s original AME church.⁵¹ By the time the church’s last meeting took place in 1981, services were held in the home of Louis and Katherine Bradley, who worshipped with a minister and a few other congregants from Topeka.⁵² Though the building had fallen out of use years before, Graves Chapel was cited in a 1983 newspaper

⁴⁵ Ibid., 428.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Thompson, 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Heigert, 428.

⁵⁰ Paxico AME Church documents, 1957.

⁵¹ Ibid., 1966.

⁵² Bradley interview, 14 June 1983.

article as “the last Black church in Wabaunsee County.”⁵³ At that time, the building was torn down to make way for a new senior citizen center, but the cornerstone and bell were placed outside in a ceremony that included Katherine Bradley and her brother-in-law Leonard, the oldest members of Graves Chapel at 90 and 93 years of age, respectively.⁵⁴ Remaining black families in Wabaunsee County raised \$300 to purchase items from the church, including part of the communion service, fans, songbooks and Bibles, which were subsequently housed in the new senior citizen center.⁵⁵ In addition, the building’s podium, ceiling lights and piano were refinished and reused, and the oak front doors were cut to make a table for the center.⁵⁶

Alma

Information about black churches in Alma is more sparse, though the town attracted a number of Exodusters and continued to have a significant black population through the 1960s. Land records, maps, and local historians all indicate that there were two black churches in Alma during the early part of the 20th century, though there are no known pictures of what these structures might have looked like. A 1902 land atlas of Wabaunsee County clearly notes the location of one “Colored Church” in the northeast part of town; anecdotal evidence suggests that this building served as the meeting place for a black Baptist congregation. The land surrounding the church was all owned by black families and was not even considered part of the city limits at that time. Directly west of this earlier church site was another black church, which is not present on the 1902 land map but is marked on a 1919 atlas. However, working from the idea that this second church was the site of an AME church in Alma, a newspaper article from Manhattan sug-

⁵³ “Paxico Community Turns Out for Senior Citizen Center Dedication,” *Wamego Smoke Signal*, 13 June 1983, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

gests the church was at least having regular meetings in the first decade of the 20th century. The item, which dates from September 1905, announces a meeting of the Epworth League, a Methodist Episcopal youth organization, at the Second Methodist Church in Manhattan.⁵⁷ Delegates from Alma, Manhattan and Clay Center would attend, and each community had one volunteer on the organizing committee.⁵⁸ This item clearly points to the existence of a black Methodist church in Alma at the time, especially if its young people were traveling to a conference in a much larger city about thirty miles away.

The demise of black churches came relatively early for a town that prospered as the county seat throughout the 20th century. Tony Meseke, a lifelong resident of the Alma area who was born in 1936, stated that he had no memory of any black church services being held in town.⁵⁹ The church on the east side of town had been gone for many years by the time Meseke was born; it is probable that it closed about the same time as the Baptist church in Paxico, falling victim to rapidly declining population and the inability of these small towns to support more than one black church. Meseke said he remembered the black church building on the west side of town, but no services had been held there for years, causing the building to fall into disrepair.⁶⁰ The only traces of a black AME church in Alma at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society are two booklets of suggested teachings and sermons from a national organization that date from 1938 and 1941. These documents seem to indicate that some sort of service was being conducted at that time or had been shortly before then.

⁵⁷ Geraldine Baker Walton, *140 Years of Soul: A History of African-Americans in Manhattan, Kansas, 1865-2005* (Manhattan, Kan.: KS Publishing, Inc., 2008), 104.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Meseke interview, 24 April 2009.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Regardless, Meseke stated that the building itself was “in bad shape” with no paint left on any of its walls.⁶¹ Though he could not remember a specific year, Meseke said the building was torn down in the late 1940s or early ‘50s and the lumber was used to build a house on the same land. After the church’s closure, a few black families did choose to attend church in the town’s predominantly white congregations. Ronnell Bennett, a laborer who worked for local farmers like Meseke’s father, attended the Evangelical and Reformed Church, while younger members of the prominent Gardenhire family joined the town’s large St. John’s Lutheran Church.⁶² Meseke reported that these new members were well accepted by the existing congregations, but these Exoduster descendents proved to be the exception, not the rule, in Alma.

Other Church Sites: Wabaunsee and Chalk

At least one other community in the county supported a black church for a number of years, which could be considered fitting given its history as a colony founded by abolitionists. The town of Wabaunsee, located on the banks of the Kansas River, was settled by members of a Congregationalist group from New Haven, Connecticut in 1856.⁶³ Colony members hoped to make Kansas Territory free soil, and smuggled rifles in boxes of Bibles to fend off pesky border ruffians from Missouri. The church these abolitionists founded in 1862 became known as the Beecher Bible and Rifle Church to mark their ingenious method of fighting slavery, which was funded by famous New England preacher Henry Ward Beecher.⁶⁴ Despite this background and its status as a stop on the Underground Railroad, substantial numbers of black settlers did not arrive in the area until the Exodus of 1879. Once settled, black farmers soon developed a church.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “The Beecher Bible and Rifle Church,” Pamphlet created by church members, Wabaunsee, Kansas, 2008.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

An 1885 atlas of Wabaunsee indicates the presence of a black church on the northern end of town on the property of Archie Beard, an Exoduster, and a 1919 atlas identifies the same church as housing an AME congregation.

Details of the actual workings of the church, including information about services and members, are elusive largely because of the lack of a newspaper based in Wabaunsee. However, its fate can be inferred from the area's declining population and the closing of the Beecher Bible church itself. In 1885, six years after the initial migration, the state census reports seventy-two blacks living in Wabaunsee Township – a population that could easily support a church. By 1925, however, the population had decreased to 46 blacks in the township, a trend that mirrored the population loss in the town of Wabaunsee as a whole. The town's Congregationalist church was forced to disband in 1927 and did not reorganize until 1950, at which time it reportedly became the first interracial congregation in Kansas.⁶⁵ At the time the Beecher Bible Church disbanded, Wabaunsee did have one or two other churches, but if the majority white population was having trouble supporting churches, it seems unlikely that a smaller black population would have been able to sustain a church for much longer. Perhaps most telling, a memoir detailing life in Wabaunsee in the 1930s and '40s by Edward J. Leonard lists only 20 black residents and includes information about many local institutions but makes no mention of a black church.⁶⁶

The record stands with seven confirmed black churches in Wabaunsee County, but population figures indicate there might have been another church in the southwestern part of the county, as shown by Figure 4 in Appendix A. The original Exoduster colony in the county was located on two sections of land cater-corner from each other in Farmer and Rock Creek town-

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Edward J. Leonard, hand-written memoir, Wamego, Kansas, 20 Feb. 1993, 1-15.

ships.⁶⁷ This colony was established with the aid of the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association and was self-sustaining by December 1880, but small plots and a lack of suitable land led black homesteaders to sell the ground within a few years.⁶⁸ However, there were still 57 blacks living in Rock Creek Township in 1885, and marriage records, along with anecdotal evidence, suggest that many moved a few miles east to an area that became known as Chalk Mound, or simply Chalk. This location, near a small creek, provided groundwater that made farming the area more feasible than in the relatively dry location of the initial colony.⁶⁹ Though the settlement never became large, a definite sense of community developed, and a school, post office, general store and Woodman's Hall soon sprang up around the crossroads where Chalk was located.⁷⁰

In addition to those who resettled from the original Wabaunsee Colony, a number of other black Exodusters soon arrived in the area. The Abbot and Skeen families were particularly prominent in the area, with nearly one hundred members of each family living at one time in the southern part of the county as indicated by marriage and census records.⁷¹ Complicating the tracking of these families is that some members were light-complected enough to pass as white in the eyes of the general population and chose to identify themselves as such.⁷² Still, there is significant evidence that enough blacks lived in the area until the turn of the century to warrant holding church services. Whites at Chalk met inside a general store for worship and a formal church building never existed in the area, so it is probable that blacks might have met in a home

⁶⁷ "New Branches from Old Trees," 873-875.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Author field notes, 27 March 2009, Farmer and Rock Creek townships, Wabaunsee County, Kansas.

⁷⁰ Personal communication to author, 31 March 2009, Alma, Kansas, by Alan Winkler, curator of Wabaunsee County Historical Society.

⁷¹ Personal communication to author, 14 February 2009, e-mail, by Benetta Foster, Wabaunsee County Historical Society Board member.

⁷² Ibid.

for services.⁷³ Though there is no concrete record of a black church in or near Chalk, demographic and anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that such a congregation existed.

The Eskridge Black Baptist Church: A Case Study

Nestled in the undulating and rocky ground of the Flint Hills, Eskridge was the nearest town for many farmers and ranchers in the 1880s, including several black residents. Though some Exodusters moved to the Chalk area when the original colony disbanded, many more black families moved further east to settle in Wilmington and Mission Creek townships, where both groundwater and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad were more accessible.⁷⁴ Soil and weather conditions made it nearly impossible to make a living on less than 160 acres of land, though, and several black farmers had moved into the Eskridge community by 1901. This population segment remained relatively stable until the 1930s, when economic hardships caused many blacks to seek employment in more urban settings like Topeka and Kansas City. As Eskridge's black population dwindled, membership in its Baptist church declined as well until its closure in 1963. There was only one black person living in Eskridge in 2009, making it even more imperative that the history of this vibrant institution be studied and recorded now before its participants die, taking valuable knowledge with them.

The earliest known date of a Baptist church in Eskridge is 1874, as indicated by a plaque outside the 2008 location of the First Baptist Church. No other information about the church's physical structure or congregation is available, but demographic settlement patterns of the time, before the largest push of freedmen to Kansas, almost ensure that this church had a predominantly white congregation. An 1887 atlas of Eskridge displays the site of a "Colored Baptist Church,"

⁷³ Winkler communication, 31 March 2009.

⁷⁴ "New Branches from Old Trees," 873-875.

but Addie Swagerty asserted that the Baptist congregation used four different sites throughout the city throughout the 1890s.⁷⁵ The next reference to an Eskridge Baptist Church occurs in Matt Thomson's turn-of-the-century history of the county. The pictorial section of the book includes photos of two different buildings both identified as Baptist churches in Eskridge, but the text contains no additional information.⁷⁶ One has chancel windows, a steeple and trees all around, while the other is a small, squat structure in a barren landscape. These inconclusive pictures provide the only definitive evidence of two separate Baptist churches in Eskridge until 1909, when a number of land deeds and newspaper articles make reference to the "Colored Baptist Church." On March 18, 1909, Wesley Page and Sanford Clark, two blacks who jointly owned Lots 13-18 in the City of Eskridge proper, sold those six lots to the Colored Second Baptist Church for \$600. The men had purchased the lots in 1904 for the same price, but there is no evidence of church activity at the site before the 1909 sale. Less than a month later, a notice appeared in the town newspaper, *The Eskridge Tribune-Star*, to announce the laying of a cornerstone for the Colored Second Baptist Church, as seen in Figure 2. The notice includes the information that Rev. J.H. Vanlue from Wichita will present a special sermon at 11 a.m. on April 18 before the cornerstone laying at 3 p.m., and concludes by stating, "We have extended an invitation to white and colored people."⁷⁷ An item two weeks later reports that a freewill gathering of \$66 was collected at the event, with the congregation hoping to occupy the structure by the middle of May.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Hoobler, "Yankee Doodle Dandy," 6.

⁷⁶ Matt Thomson, *Early History of Wabaunsee County, Kansas* (Alma, 1901).

⁷⁷ "Notice," *Eskridge Tribune-Star*, 8 April 1909, 6.

⁷⁸ "Notice," *Eskridge Tribune-Star*, 22 April 1909, 4.



Figure 2. Eskridge Second Baptist Church Cornerstone. This cornerstone from the 1909 church building included a chiseled space for church founding papers and mementos in the back. Showing the effects of many years of weathering, it now rests in the basement of the First Baptist Church in Eskridge.

No story or notice was published when the congregation occupied the new building, but a collection of “2nd Baptist Church Notes” in an early July newspaper suggest that the congregation was formally organized and using the new building by mid-summer 1909. The notes are authored by the church’s pastor, identified as Rev. William E. Harrison, and include details such as the past week’s Scripture passage and the location of four baptisms, which took place in “the pond near Rinker’s home.”⁷⁹ The relatively large number of baptisms performed at once would seem to indicate that such opportunities had been infrequent before this time. The section makes special mention of an upcoming visit from the district missionary of the Smoky Hill River Baptist Association, urging attendance at that service before concluding with another appeal to all citizens of Eskridge: “We welcome both white and colored.”⁸⁰ At the end of the summer, an article in the *Tribune-Star* described all the churches in Eskridge and ended with the following in-

⁷⁹ “2nd Baptist Church Notes,” *Eskridge Tribune-Star*, 1 July 1909, 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

formation: “There are two beautiful little new churches in the east part of the city belonging to the colored people – a Methodist, recently dedicated; and a Baptist soon to be dedicated.”⁸¹

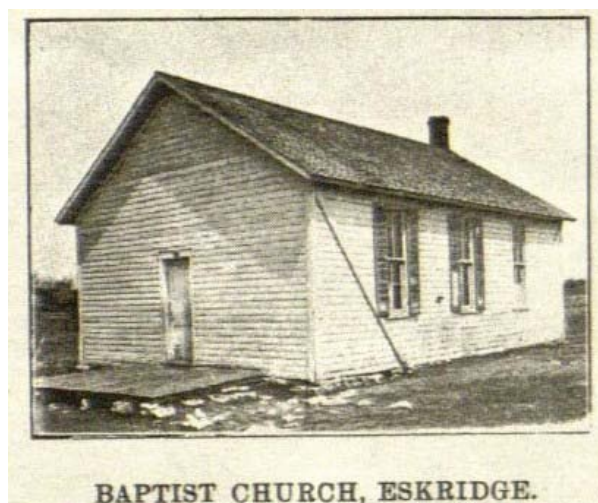


Figure 3. Black Baptist church in Eskridge, 1901. The architectural style of this church building bears striking similarities to late 19th-century black churches across the country, including in Ohio. SOURCE: Matt Thomson, *Early History of Wabaunsee County, Kansas*.

The physical structure of the Eskridge black Baptist church is difficult to recreate due to a lack of photographs and detailed written descriptions, but other sources can suggest architectural style and building size. Thomson’s 1901 photos of the two Eskridge Baptist churches do not make any distinction between congregations, but the smaller, simpler building bears striking similarities to churches in black Ohio communities of the same time period.⁸² In particular, the Lewis Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, built in Rumley County, Ohio in 1886, has the same shape, number of windows, and orientation as the wooden frame Baptist church in Eskridge in 1901, as shown in Figure 3. This style can also be glimpsed in a photo published in the Eskridge newspaper after an April 12, 1911 tornado that injured twenty-five people, damaged an equal number of homes and “completely destroyed the Covenanter and Second Baptist

⁸¹ “Eskridge Churches,” *Eskridge Tribune-Star*, 26 August 1909, 1.

⁸² Mary Ann Brown, “Vanished Black Communities in Western Ohio,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Vol. 1 (1982): 103-107.

churches.”⁸³ The photo, which is identified as being of the “residence of John Carter and Baptist Church,” shows a frame building nearly identical to the Baptist church in the 1901 photo tipped on its side.⁸⁴ Taken together, the three photos suggest a shared architectural heritage among freedmen who moved to the North and built their own churches, adhering to a style seen across a span of 25 years and in two states.

Ironically, an account of the aftermath of a storm’s destruction provides the most detailed written description of the Second Baptist church building itself. A newspaper story about continuous rebuilding efforts in the city devoted a paragraph to the Second Baptist church and described its building this way: “The church at the time of the storm was new and had just been completed at considerable of a strain on the finances of its membership. It was a good building and had a cement basement where entertainments could be held. It was electric wired and well finished throughout.”⁸⁵ The article, which describes the site of the church as “only a scattered confusion of timbers and shingles,” states that no definitive decisions about the church’s future had been made, despite an earlier published intention to rebuild.⁸⁶ No further reference is found to the church’s reopening, but the lack of a land sale would seem to indicate that the church was rebuilt on its original site. However, the size of the church grounds was diminished just a few years after the 1911 tornado with the sale of Lots 17 and 18 together in August 1913 and then Lots 13 and 14 in October 1914, leaving the church Lots 15 and 16. Specific uses of the other lots are not described in newspaper accounts, though there is a reference to a parsonage in the

⁸³ “Half of Our City Wrecked by Twister,” *Eskridge Tribune-Star*, 13 April 1920, 1.

⁸⁴ “Eskridge, Kansas, as Seen After the Cyclone,” *Eskridge Tribune-Star*, 20 April 1911, 7-8.

⁸⁵ “Hill City Crawls Out of the Debris,” *Eskridge Tribune-Star*, 22 June 1911, 1.

⁸⁶ “After the Cyclone,” *Eskridge Tribune-Star*, 7.

initial article recounting the tornado's destruction.⁸⁷ This structure is not mentioned in any 1909 articles about the church's building, however, making its date and origin uncertain.

A private residence now sits directly on the site of the Eskridge black Baptist church and there are no known photos of the building when it was rebuilt, but former church attendees remember some details of the church's appearance. Otis Menefee, the last black person living in Eskridge in fall 2008, was born on a farm in Mission Creek Township in 1935 and moved to town with his family in 1951.⁸⁸ Though the family had not attended any church before moving to Eskridge, Menefee's father Henry became a deacon, while his mother Ruby became the church clerk. Menefee stated that the church was a small wooden building, "like a schoolhouse in size," with "plain" windows, a description which further matches the 1901 and 1911 photographs of an earlier building.⁸⁹ Inside, the church had two flanks of side pews which contained traditional Baptist hymnals. The center aisle led to the front where there was a piano and altar.⁹⁰

Joyce (Scott) Grigsby also attended the Second Baptist Church in the 1950s. After moving to Eskridge as a nine-year-old to live with her grandparents, Grigsby began attending the church in 1950.⁹¹ She stated that she remembers a choir stand and pulpit as well as the pews and altar. The building was always "clean and well kept-up" by its members, including regular application of a fresh coat of paint.⁹² During the summer, windows were opened since the church did not have air conditioning, but trees that once stood around the back of the building probably helped cool the congregation.⁹³

⁸⁷ "City Wrecked," *Eskridge Tribune-Star*, 1.

⁸⁸ Otis Menefee, interview by M.J. Morgan and Benetta Foster, written notes, Eskridge, Kansas, 13 September 2008.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Joyce (Scott) Grigsby, interview by author and M.J. Morgan, written notes, Topeka, Kansas, 5 December 2008.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

The most important activities of a church often take place away from services. Social gatherings, committee meetings, and holiday programs all foster a sense of community within the congregation and encourage commitment to the church. The church's earliest members recognized this fact, as an October 1909 item in the *Eskridge Tribune-Star* indicates. Published just six months after the laying of the church's cornerstone, the notes state that a cement floor is being put in the basement, which will be used for "social suppers and gatherings."⁹⁴ The inside of the building was also going to be painted with funds from the Green Club, which raised a "handsome little sum" towards this expense by presenting entertainment for church members. Other social activities presented opportunities for church attendees to work together on activities that attracted the entire community. George Mercer, a lifelong resident of Eskridge who was born in 1908, remembers seeing summer tent revival meetings across the street from the church as a child, suggesting this particular Baptist tradition had a solid foundation in the black congregation at Eskridge.⁹⁵ In 1920, members of the church created a musical variety show and performed it twice in the Woodman Opera House, with profits going towards the church itself.⁹⁶ The newspaper account of the evening identifies about a dozen performers, both children and adults, who sang popular songs and traditional hymns, and heaps praise upon each one. The show had generated such an enthusiastic response that the church planned to present it again the following weekend in Harveyville, about nine miles southeast of Eskridge. Church members played to a full opera house there as well, generating more profits that were "sure to be substantial."⁹⁷

Though the number of black residents in Eskridge declined in the subsequent thirty years, the church continued to support social activities both with local predominantly white churches

⁹⁴ "Notes of the Second Baptist Church," *Eskridge Tribune-Star*, 7 October 1909, 1.

⁹⁵ George Mercer, interview by author and M.J. Morgan, written notes, Topeka, Kansas, 5 December 2008.

⁹⁶ "They Did Themselves Proud," *Eskridge Independent*, 17 March 1920, 1.

⁹⁷ "Harveyville Loves It Too," *Eskridge Independent*, 24 March 1920, 1.

and black churches from larger Kansas towns. Joyce Grigsby remembers working with one of her friends in high school to create a Bible Youth Organization in Eskridge.⁹⁸ About 20 teenagers from the different local churches met on Sunday nights and visited all the church buildings, taking part in Scripture reading, Bible study, and hymn singing throughout the evening. Enjoying refreshments and conversation with friends were also highlights of the evening, according to Grigsby. All the churches in Eskridge also came together for a special Christmas program at the Methodist church each year.⁹⁹ The afternoon contained all the elements of a traditional Christmas service, including a nativity scene, reading of the Christmas story, sermon, and singing of carols. Attendees of the black Baptist church also took time to enjoy fellowship with other black Baptists. On Wednesday evenings, all the church members would gather for a prayer meeting, then the young people would stay at the church and practice their choral selections for the next Sunday's service.¹⁰⁰ During the summer, when the youth organization did not move, church members welcomed other congregations to the Sunday service and visited black Baptist churches in larger eastern Kansas towns, including Atchison, Abilene, Emporia, and Topeka.¹⁰¹ These trips provided opportunities for interaction with black community members in Kansas cities even as the black population in Eskridge continued to decline.

This drop in church membership, as well as a structural incident, led to the closure of the Second Baptist Church in Eskridge. Grigsby stated that there were 10-15 members when she went to the church in high school, but attendance had dropped by the time she moved away from Eskridge in 1960.¹⁰² This was not due to any one factor but was simply the reflection of an aging black population. The families who had attended the church in the early part of the 20th century

⁹⁸ Grigsby interview, 5 December 2008.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

had gradually moved away, unable to survive with farming during the Dust Bowl. Otis Menefee said he believes many black men in Wabaunsee County moved to Topeka in the 1930s to find employment in the railyards there.¹⁰³ This outward migration, along with an aging population, was evident in the fact that the church's last two pastors actually lived in Topeka and traveled an hour each Sunday to give a sermon at Eskridge. Menefee and Grigsby both remember Rev. Herbert Robertson preaching at the church in the 1950s. He came from New Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and his wife played the piano and accompanied the choir during services.¹⁰⁴

Rev. J.J. Oakes had become the pastor by May 1962, when a fire sealed the church's fate. Ruby Menefee told the *Eskridge Independent* that church members had been preparing for a joint meeting with the Eighth Street Baptist Church of Topeka, with a dinner to be held in the basement of the church beforehand.¹⁰⁵ When Oakes lit the church's oil stove, it exploded, setting fire to tables and floor joists. The fire department arrived in time to stop the blaze from spreading to the auditorium but "very serious" damage had already resulted.¹⁰⁶ The next newspaper reference to the Menefees and their church comes nearly a year later with the announcement that the First Baptist Church will host the World Day of Prayer meeting in Eskridge with the other local Protestant churches at the "former Covenanter Church building."¹⁰⁷ It was at this location, just a few blocks from the original location of the black Baptist Church, that a new "cornerstone" for the First Baptist Church was laid next to the existing building on June 28, 1964. The deacons, clerk, and pastor listed on the plaque are all those of the former Second Baptist Church, and the cornerstone of the 1909 building which was destroyed in the tornado now rests in the basement of the only Baptist church in Eskridge in 2008.

¹⁰³ Menefee interview, 13 September 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Grigsby interview, 5 December 2008.

¹⁰⁵ "Fire at Baptist Church Controlled," *Eskridge Independent*, 31 May 1962, 1.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ "World Day of Prayer," *Eskridge Independent*, 21 February 1963, 1.

Churches played a vibrant role in the life of rural Kansas blacks, as evidenced by the history of the black Baptist church in Eskridge. Records of church services and social gatherings provide information about blacks' place in Eskridge, while the denomination and physical structure point to links with a nationwide heritage. The history and fate of Kansas Exodusters has been rendered incomplete by historians who have not closely examined the role of social institutions like churches in black settlements or integrated communities. Though this topic is practically untouched, making initial research more difficult, the insights to be gained about patterns and routines of black settlement in the post-Reconstruction North make further study and consideration of early black churches essential to present a more complete portrait of African-Americans in Kansas.

Appendix A

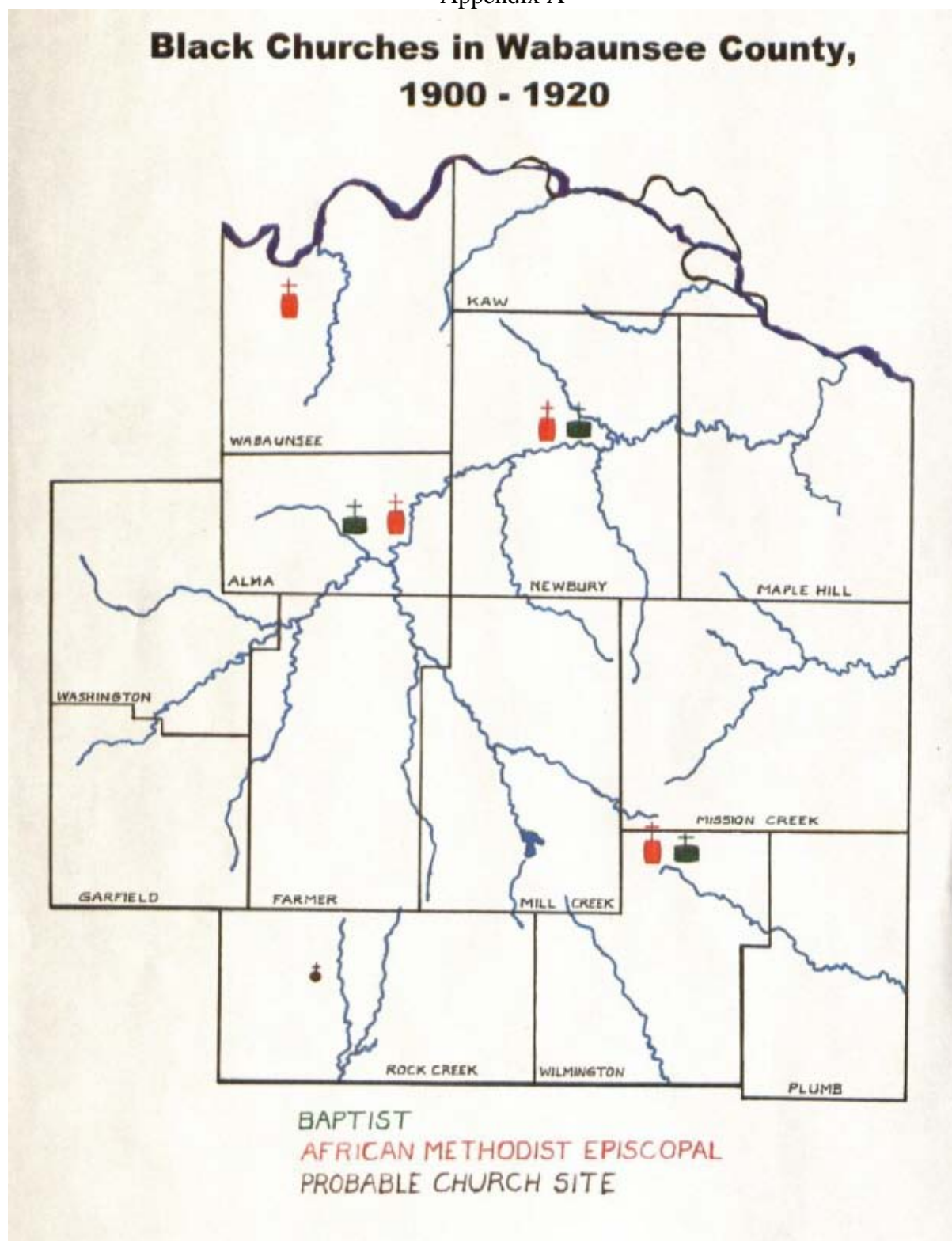


Figure 4. Confirmed and probable black Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal churches in Wabaunsee County, Kansas, 1900-1920. Map by Sandra Reddish.

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