

Junction City, Manhattan and Topeka, Kansas School Districts 1930-1960: Patterns of Segregation

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Oliver Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 1954, was one of the most important Supreme Court cases in American history. Kansas itself had a very interesting story leading up to the decision. Topeka is, of course, the site that is most famous in Kansas for its role. Manhattan and Junction City, two towns that are relatively close to Topeka, also have revealing stories about segregation and the changes that followed Brown vs. Board. Because of population, culture, and many other factors, each town had its own distinct history about the education system before and after the case. Take a look at Figure 1, for example.



Figure 1 circa 1943 Topeka State Journal

This picture shows what many headlines throughout Kansas and even the nation looked like. Yet in each town this front page headline meant different things. In some towns such as Manhattan and Topeka it was a very important headline for the community. In Manhattan alone it would officially make the five elementary schools in town integrated schools. In other towns, such as Junction City, many people may not have thought it would change their lives so much because the schools were already integrated. Only the history from before and after this decision would tell what the true outcome would be.

Brown v. Board was not the first case in Kansas to fight segregation. There were many before but most failed, for example, Reynolds v. the Board of Education of Topeka in 1903. This case started when a one classroom school burned down. Afterwards the African American children were moved to an old building while the white students went to a new two story classroom. During the case it was decided that first class cities were allowed to operate separate elementary schools. The 14<sup>th</sup> amendment did not supersede Kansas law which is what the original argument was in the case. <sup>1</sup>

There was also Wright v. the Board of Education of Topeka in 1929. Wihemina Wright transferred from Randolph to Buchanan School. Randolph was only 20 blocks away from her family farm but Buchanan school was very far away and she would have to cross busy intersections to get there. The family also lost this case; there was bus transportation, and once again, Topeka was a first class city which meant segregation. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of the State of Kansas. Dewey, Tomas. 1903, 2010, <http://brownvboard.org/research/handbook/sources/reynolds/reynolds.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Wright v. The Board of Education of the City of Topeka, A. J. Stout, and G. L. Coffman. [George Wright](#). 1930, 2010, <http://brownvboard.org/research/handbook/sources/wright/wright.htm>

Kansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, South Carolina, and Virginia were the five states that had a case against the board of education. When it came to the state of Kansas, most African American schools were not in bad shape. They had to keep with the standards of all the other schools and so students were not deprived of a good education.<sup>3</sup> However, some felt it was important to have the Topeka case listed first to show it was not just a “southern issue”. It was a strategic plan formed by the NAACP to bring this case up in many states throughout the United States. Oliver Brown was one of almost 200 who decided to join the cause. The NAACP did not only want to end segregation in education but also in every aspect that affected the African American community.<sup>4</sup> This is why it is important not only to understand what the educational system was like, but also the social aspect African Americans had to face during years of segregation.

Topeka, Manhattan, and Junction City were all completely different towns in the 1950s. All three towns are located in northeast Kansas and all within 60 miles of each other. Topeka is of course the capital of Kansas where the case took place. Manhattan has Kansas State University which at the time was Kansas State College and allowed African Americans to go the school and even participate in sports. Junction City is located right next to Fort Riley and is where most of the soldiers lived. Many African Americans were employed there at the time.

## **Topeka**

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<sup>3</sup> Landmark decisions of the United States Supreme Court. Harrison, Maureen & Gilbert, Steve, editors. Beverly Hills, California, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. March 03, 2010. <http://www.nps.gov/brvb/index.htm>



Figure 2 circa 1920s Monroe Elementary School, Topeka

Topeka is one of the most famous sites when discussing *Brown v. Board*. Figure two is of the Monroe school which was an African American school at the time. The school's history starts even before slaves were free. In 1859 a very well known abolitionist, John Ritchie, bought 160 acres of land to build homes, many that helped harbor runaway slaves. After the Civil War, many of the freed slaves came to Topeka and formed their own community. The school board decided to open the Monroe School, in "Ritchie's Addition". This was not the building that is there today, but the area gave rise to the African American school. After Ritchie died they Topeka board of Education bought the land that was being used and built the school that would be known as the Monroe School. This building seen in the picture was the third Monroe school and officially opened in 1926. It is, in fact, the segregated school that Linda Brown attended before she and her father went to court over segregation. It closed in 1975 due to decline

in enrollment and it wasn't until 1992 that it officially became the Brown v. Board of Education Historical Site.<sup>5</sup>

Because Topeka was much larger than Manhattan and Junction City, roughly 80,000 people in Topeka, there was a completely different culture for the African Americans that grew up during this time. There were four African American elementary schools: Monroe, Washington, McKinley and Buchanan. They were all K-8 until 1941 when the Graham Case forced all the schools to be similar, which meant the African American schools had to change to K-6 like the white schools.<sup>6</sup>

Reading through several oral interview transcripts, many of the African Americans who went to segregated elementary schools believed the teachers worked them very hard to prepare them for the integrated schools.<sup>7</sup> Jack Alexander was one of the many African Americans interviewed who discussed the experience of a segregated school in Topeka. He also discussed what it was like to grow up in a segregated community. In the 1930s his family moved to what was called "Mudtown" and referred to that until the 1960s. This was a completely isolated African American area. There were several African American businesses in the area so most never had to venture out of the community.

None of the interviews suggested that any of the African American children felt they lost any sort of education or opportunity because of the segregation in elementary schools. Of course they knew it was not "equal" but most mentioned that they always had important role models, such as teachers or parents who made sure they never felt that

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<sup>5</sup>Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. March 03, 2010. <http://www.nps.gov/brvb/index.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Joe Douglas. Brown v. Topeka Board of Education Oral History Collection. Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, Kansas. 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

they were in less superior than anybody else. African American teachers knew it was important to make sure the students would not be behind when moving on to junior high so many accounts explain that they were worked harder in elementary school than junior or high school.<sup>8</sup>

Alexander felt that the transition to an integrated junior high was traumatic at first but easier because everybody was at a similar economic/social level. He could not recall any incidents between the different races. It is interesting that in high school all the sports were integrated except for basketball. The African Americans had always had their own team and few worried about integrating. Alexander admits that many looked forward to the segregation.<sup>9</sup> This could be expected since many of these children spent the first ten to twelve years of their life being separated from others.

Brown vs. Board of Education changed the way the American school system was functioning. Manhattan Kansas, which is only 50 miles away from Topeka and Junction City Kansas, about 20 miles further away, had very different changes that occurred after the decision. Manhattan had been segregated since the early 1900s and Junction City had not been segregated since 1876. These differences, along with the different cultures each town had, brought on many different reactions. Just because the towns were located so close together did not mean in any way that they had similar stories.

## **Manhattan**

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Alexander. Brown v. Topeka Board of Education Oral History Collection. Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, Kansas. 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Alexander. Brown v. Topeka Board of Education Oral History Collection. Kansas State Historical Society. Topeka, Kansas. 2001.

In 1865 Manhattan had 328 citizens and only nine of them were African American. Within only 30 years this number had increased to 357. Because these African Americans lived in such a close community they did want their children to be taught by others of the same race; however, in August 1879 the *Manhattan Enterprise* reported that the African Americans would not separate from the whites; in 1884 the Avenue School was used by both whites and African Americans. However, in the same school they were separated by classrooms. There were four rooms in the school so each race had two rooms.

Once again in the early part of the 1900s the African American community started to support the idea of their children staying in their own community. In June of 1903 during a school board meeting they asked for their own school and within only one month they were successful in convincing the school board and a two room school house was built known as the Douglas School.

Manhattan had five elementary schools by the 1950s and had 19,059 residents in the 1950s. Four of the schools were all white schools and one was the Douglas school. All elementary schools were required to have the same standards, so it was very costly for Manhattan to maintain the Douglas school. While the white elementary schools had 200-300 students in the year 1953, Douglas only had 65 students. All of the teachers and even the principal taught more than one grade and because of this situation, the teachers at Douglas had twice the preparation of lessons to do to keep the same education level as the other schools. To compensate for it, they were paid a lot higher wages. The floors were oak and the building was made of native stone. There were four classrooms, a principal's office, and a library. Two of the classrooms were separated with a removable

wall and could be converted into an auditorium. It was hard to use the auditorium when it was a rainy day or students needed to practice sports. The school was considered in excellent condition especially after it was remodeled in the 1930s.

There was no actual school district stated in the school handbook for African Americans; it only said that all Negro pupils from kindergarten to and including six graders shall attend Douglas School.<sup>10</sup> It was assumed that the blacks would choose the Douglas school so to not separate their community in any way. There is evidence that a few whites did attend the school before Brown vs. Board and according to Don Slater, an African American who attended Douglas school in the late 1940s, none of the children even thought twice about the difference between the white and black children.<sup>11</sup> As for other whites that lived in the area, most attended Woodrow Wilson or Theodore Roosevelt schools. These later became the first official integrated elementary schools in Manhattan.

After sixth grade, the African Americans joined with the white children in junior high and high school. In an article posted by Manhattan Mercury in 1953, the writer discusses how the African Americans had many opportunities to help them interact with the white children which would help them make the transition into the integrated schools. Most of the sports that were offered for Douglas school were played against the white elementary schools. In 1942, records show that the school even had programs to help lessen the sharpness of the change from segregation to non segregated schools such as the sports and assemblies.

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<sup>10</sup> Walton, Geraldine. 140 Years of Soul: A History of African-Americans in Manhattan, Kansas. Manhattan, KS, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Don Slater, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Gifted Students Class. Packet, Manhattan, Kansas. 2007

Don Slater is an African American Manhattan resident who went to Douglas School during the 1940s and 1950s. He currently runs the tutoring program and the Douglas Center, is a building that is across the street from the old school. He still truly believes in the importance of education for everybody. Born in 1939, Slater spent most of his childhood living at 830 Yuma Street, only a block away from the school. African Americans at that time were expected to only live on either Yuma or Pottawatomie, the street south of Yuma. He and his classmates were not allowed to go to restaurants or most of the theaters. In their minds they did not need to go to any of them. They were happy staying in their neighborhood. The black community was like a huge family and every parent helped raise the other children. Slater remembered the day that he would never let segregation make him cry. One summer he and his brother went to the swimming pool and were by the fence watching all the white children swimming around. A lifeguard yelled at both of them for being near the pool and Slater told him ‘the heck with you’ and decided right then and there he could cry about it or he could choose to not let such things bring him down because that would only tear a person up.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 3 shows the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade classes in 1949 that were taught by Hattie Belle Woods. The picture below has some of the same children when they were in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade in 1951. This class was taught by Fred Willtoite. One thing Don Slater pointed out in his speech to a 6<sup>th</sup> grade gifted class was how happy all the children were in these pictures. Like the teacher, Slater was in a suit and he was proud to point this out and show how much he liked school before they integrated into the junior high and high schools.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Figure 3 circa 1949 & 1951 courtesy of Don Slater.

David Fiser, who graduated from Manhattan high school in 1957, also had many memories of how Manhattan was during the segregation of the elementary schools. As a white child growing up, he remembers that in sports they could play against the Douglas school children but as far as inter-racial dating and African Americans going to the swimming pool it was never allowed.<sup>14</sup>

Pat Duncan also wrote about his experience with segregation growing up in Manhattan. The segregation was so pronounced that he did not even see his first African American until he was in rookie league and had a black coach. He also remembers when the first African American bought a house on Stag Hill, very far away from Yuma St. People were horrified at the idea of the African Americans expanding outside their community.<sup>15</sup>

On the day of Brown vs. Board of Education decision, the Manhattan Mercury-Chronicle had the case as the top story. The newspaper also included quotes from southern congressmen who were outraged by the decision. A few days later the article about the case was on the second page of the paper. This article also included a story about southern governors having a special meeting about the decision. All the articles were reported as a national headline. The only article that even mentioned Kansas discussed briefly how the state would be able to adapt to the new law very quickly.

The Manhattan newspaper did not show any sign that the case might affect the community. This could be for several reasons. The paper may have not wanted to show that there would be changes going on in the community. They may have felt this would cause a lot of controversy among people who still believed segregation was a good thing.

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<sup>14</sup> Don Slater, personal correspondence, Manhattan, Kansas, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

It also could have been because it did not mean that the businesses had to give the African Americans' service. For whatever reason it was, The Manhattan Mercury-Chronicle only reported the case in national news.

A year later, Manhattan Mercury reported in 1955 that the superintendent had announced that since Douglas school had no geographical boundaries, any child living in Woodrow Wilson district could either attend Douglas or Woodrow and any child living in Roosevelt area could go to Douglas or Roosevelt. This could very well have been one of the first times in Manhattan that segregation was being put in the past publicly.

The last years for the Douglas school were during 1961-1962. There were 38 students and two teachers. By then many of the teachers and students had gone to the other schools that were near them. There were some white children who were attending at this time but for the most part there was still a majority of African Americans.<sup>16</sup>

Manhattan's story can be relatable to the Topeka area on a smaller scale. Like Topeka, the African Americans had their own little community in south Manhattan. They felt secure in their historical segregated area south of Poyntz Avenue. As the reader will see in the next section, Junction City's story is a lot different from both Topeka and Manhattan. The schools were already integrated since Junction City was a smaller place. There are factors that make Junction City different than the other towns mentioned; yet segregation was a reality there as well.

### **Junction City**

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<sup>16</sup> Walton, Geraldine. 140 Years of Soul: A History of African-Americans in Manhattan, Kansas. Manhattan, KS,2008.

As mentioned, Junction City school district was a very different story. They had been integrated since 1876. In the early ruling, Kansas law stated that they did not have a big enough population to have segregated schools. In 1950 there were 13,462 residents. The society in Junction City was also a lot different.<sup>17</sup> Many of the families that lived around the schools were from military families and although the military was segregated, most people would agree that the racial barriers were not as bad. Many of the neighborhoods were integrated and so many of the white children grew up playing with their African American friends never even knowing that in other areas that would never be allowed. On many accounts white children did not even know their peers could not attend movies or go to restaurants because of their color. Their friends would simply make up an excuse every time they were invited out to somewhere they were not allowed to go.

Although an integrated school district may sound like the schools had no racial disputes, there is always another side to every story. Departmental, Franklin, Margaret, Olesen and Washington were the elementary schools and there was a junior high and high school. One issue was the opportunity for African Americans to teach. Because Junction City was integrated there was no opportunity for any African American to teach. This was a downfall to any African American who continued his/her education further as an educator and then wanted to return to Junction City.

One of the most significant issues that occurred in the 1930s-1940s involved the high school yearbook called the Pow Wow. Starting in 1931 all senior pictures were alphabetized except the three African Americans whose senior pictures were put in last.

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<sup>17</sup> Carper, James. *The Popular Ideology of Segregated Schooling: Attitudes Toward the Education of Blacks in Kansas, 1854-1900*. 254-265. 1978.

This had never happened before and although never confirmed, it was rumored that the reason for it was a member of the school board did not want her daughter's picture between two African Americans as it would have been alphabetically. This tradition continued until 1937 when one black student was put in alphabetically, but no reason was ever discovered why it had changed back. In 1940-1942, the Pow Wow went back to segregating the African American students in the year book. It would not only segregate the senior pictures but also not show any pictures where whites and blacks were together, unless it was a school sport. In 1943 things began to change. Many of the African American seniors had fathers who were serving in World War II. They did not at all want to be treated like they were any lesser of people than their classmates so instead of having their pictures put in the back of the book, they refused to submit any senior pictures. The students who did this never thought their stand made any difference but to other people it truly did. Whether it was the teachers who took part in this or the administration who may have been afraid that later classes would also protest, the next few years showed an improvement in the yearbook. Until 1947 the yearbook did a better job in clustering pictures of African Americans in with the whites, although they still would not show pictures of both together. By 1948 the Pow Wow officially went back to alphabetizing all students. Many people still credit the class of 1943 for making the change happen.<sup>18</sup> This is just one example of how Junction City was still very much segregated even within integrated schools.

On May 17, 1954, the *Junction City Union* reported as its front headline that school segregation was held unconstitutional. In this article it gives a summary of what

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<sup>18</sup> "Yearbooks Tell Story of Segregations, Integration in Junction City". The *Junction City Union*, Junction City, May 28, 2000.

this meant for the nation. In the article below was a more regional focus. In this article the writer quotes the Kansas Attorney General in saying that it will not be hard for Kansas to change and follow the new laws that will come from the decision. The only issue he was concerned about was finding jobs for the “colored teachers”. The article continues to explain which states were involved and how in Kansas the law that was being attacked was the one that permits but does not require cities of more than 15,000 to maintain separate school facilities.<sup>19</sup> This article gave many examples of why this decision was important for the United States.

Although the newspaper did not have any articles about the effect it might cause for Junction City there are many ways to read between the lines. Because all of the articles that were posted about Brown vs. Board were on the front page, it shows that Junction City recognized the decision to be a very important one. There were articles posted every few days for a few weeks after the decision, keeping the city updated on what the outcome would be for the nation. However, as also happened in Manhattan, because there were no local articles or even opinions written about the decision, it makes a reader believe that Junction City did not see the decision as something that would affect their town. Unfortunately the type of segregation that was happening within Junction City was not one that the court system could fix. Even though the schools were already integrated, they still had the tough task of teaching all students and faculty members that everybody should be treated equally.

The differences among Topeka, Manhattan, and Junction City were very obvious in some ways and in others not as much. Although the communities had different outcomes from the decision, they all had issues of segregation they needed to work on.

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<sup>19</sup> “School Segregation Unconstitutional”. *The Junction City Union*, Junction City, May 17 1954.

Junction City had a form of subtle, manipulated segregation in their integrated schools. Manhattan had one segregated school that had to learn to integrate, and Topeka had many segregated schools and was looked at nationally during the decision. Newspaper articles also showed the differences between the towns in how they reported the court case. Learning about the culture and the types of schools in each town helps bring to light what Brown vs. Board of education changed in each community.

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