

The Process of Integrating Public Schools in Wichita, Kansas 1890-1971

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This document includes the following: a brief history of the Wichita Kansas segregated school system, including avoiding integration in the 1950's. The study also addresses the legal process of integrating the Wichita schools in the late 1960's. It uses city plat maps, census data, and legal analysis.

The journey of integrating schools of inner city Wichita, Kansas, compared to surrounding rural areas could not have been more different throughout the twentieth century. During the years, 1874-1971, the segregation of schools was extremely evident in the large populated cities of Kansas. However, there were civil right laws to help less fortunate African Americans, for example, the 1874 Civil Rights law, which basically implied African Americans could attend white schools if no separate institution existed. However, laws like this that were passed with exceptions did not help abolish segregation and were not feasible in areas of higher populations. Five years later in 1879, "The [Kansas] legislature revised the school code to allow towns of 15,000 populations to establish separate primary schools for African Americans."¹ With this particular law passed, it allowed large cities in Kansas, like Wichita, to remain segregated, unlike their neighboring, less populated townships.

Throughout this essay, I want to eliminate the misguided belief of northern innocence, commonly portrayed in our society. I will evaluate how segregation laws in the early 1900s affected the inner city African American students of Wichita, Kansas, compared to the African Americans who attend rural area schools in surrounding Sedgwick County. Once I have established the fundamental background of segregation, I will then focus on how it took Wichita nearly seventeen years after the Brown vs. Education to achieve true integration. Since my two topics are expanded over an extended timeline, I will first establish a brief background over Wichita and Sedgwick County. Within this background I will discuss how Wichita is divided

¹ "School Desegregation in Wichita Kansas." A Staff Report of the United States Commission of Civil Rights (1977): 1-32. <http://www.law.umaryland.edu/marshall/usccr/documents/cr1204523.pdf>. Last accessed 13 May 2014. See also James C. Carper, "The Popular Ideology of Segregated Schooling: Attitudes Toward the Education of Blacks in Kansas, 1854 – 1900," *Kansas History* 1 (Winter, 1978).

into different wards and how these wards played a crucial role for African Americans. I will also identify where the black schools were, compared to the all-white schools.

To fully convey my main points in this essay, I must first establish a brief background of Sedgwick County and Wichita. Firstly, Wichita is located next to the Arkansas River in the south central section in the state of Kansas. In the year of 1870, the town was officially recognized as an established city. With great numbers of African Americans migrating from the South to Kansas, the city grew to 24,000 persons by the year 1890. During the 1880s, the city of Wichita was sectionalized into five different wards. The definition of ward is: “An administrative division of a city or borough that typically elects and is represented by a counselor or councilors.”² Within these five wards the majority of African Americans lived in the 2nd ward; the 1st ward was dominantly white. During this time there was one school for each ward. For the 2nd ward, the African Americans received an education at Emerson Elementary School. This school was located on the corner of Water St. and Central Avenue, southwest of the Sedgwick County Court House. In the 1st ward the white children attended Carleton Elementary School, located on the corner of Lewis St. and Lawrence Avenue.

With the population of white and black residents increasing by the turn of the century, the numbers of black schools were unable to keep up with the increasing African American population. The city established the dual system law in 1906, which introduced four more African American schools to the city of Wichita. Before I move further I want to establish where African Americans were attending schools in the surrounding rural townships of Sedgwick County. Firstly, I will explain what exactly a township consists of. A township is part of the original rectilinear survey system by which land was surveyed in Kansas. Sedgwick County

² Definition from Dictionary.com

contains 28 townships, with 35 being the norm.³ Out of the 28 townships in Sedgwick County, I will be examining the township of Wichita which included both the city and country areas.

Unlike the highly populated cities of Kansas, the rural areas almost certainly would have had integrated school houses. This was because the African American population was extremely low in the surrounding rural areas of Wichita during the 1890s. Since the population was so low, there was not a separate school house for blacks. The 1874 Civil Rights law, states; “African Americans can attend white schools if no separate institution existed.”⁴

Early evidence of rural integrated school houses occurred in the township of Wichita. A single example will demonstrate this practice. Just two miles outside the city limits of Wichita, there lived an African American family on a family-owned 38 acre farm. This farm was located in the 11th section of Wichita Township. According to the 1895 Kansas State Census, James Gardner Sr. and Hattie Gardner had five children. Their names were Geo, male age 19, James Jr. male age 21, Littleton, male age 12, Neeley, male age 6, and W.M., male age 15.⁵ While these children were growing up, their only opportunity of receiving an education was from the one room school house just one and a half miles northeast of their homestead. This school was located in the first section of Wichita Township, and in my belief was an integrated school house, because the neighboring land owners, as revealed through the 1895 census, were white families. During the 1900s, this is how young African American children received an education, although it wasn't until the 1950s that Wichita primary schools would become officially integrated.

³ Definition from Dictionary.com

⁴ "History of Brown v. Board of Education." USCOURTSGOV RSS. Accessed 9 May 2014.

⁵ 1895 Kansas State Census.

The 1950s came with great change in the city of Wichita. Due to outcry from African Americans throughout the nation, America could no longer ignore its exclusionary laws and practices derived from the 1896 Supreme Court decision, *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, establishing “separate but equal” facilities. On May 17, 1954 the United States Supreme Court declared laws establishing separate public schools for blacks and whites unconstitutional. For Wichita this was old news due to the fact that in the 1951-1952 school year, Wichita had officially abandoned formal segregation. Local residents believed that Wichita was ahead of its time. “Because of this initiative, the Brown decision involving Topeka schools had small impact on Wichita.”⁶ With segregation being declared unconstitutional in 1954, W.C. Little opened as the first integrated public school in Wichita. One would believe that by the mid-1950s, Wichita was on the right course toward equality. However, this was not so. The daily life for the black man was not brightened with equality but still shadowed by Jim Crow Laws. Ronald Walters, a black Wichita native, lets us take a look back to the 1950s. “Blacks were excluded from mixing with whites at movie theaters, restaurants, nightclubs and other places of public accommodation, except for some common sports events. Even though the signs "Black" and "White" were not publicly visible as in the South, we lived in separate worlds, just as blacks and whites did in the Southern states.”⁷

Even though Jim Crow Laws gradually faded away in Wichita from the impact of multiple protests, such as the Dockum Drugstore sit in or more famously, the Montgomery Bus Boycott in North Carolina, the prejudiced beliefs of many white residents would not dissolve.

⁶ “School Desegregation in Wichita Kansas.” A Staff Report of the United States Commission of Civil Rights (1977): 1-32.

⁷ Walters, Ronald. "Standing up in Americas Heartland," *American Visions*. Feb/Mar93, Vol. 8 Issue 1, 1993.

This was most noticeable in the public schools. From 1954-1971 it was extremely evident the white citizens wanted to preserve their cherished segregated past. As the black population more than doubled in the 1950s, white neighborhoods that had been dominantly white were now becoming more diverse in race. With each neighborhood having its own public schools, the racially mixed regions were now attending the same schools. The most evident was the Mathewson Junior High. "By 1958 the ethnicity percentage was at 50% white and 50% black"⁸ Once Mathewson Junior High became racially diverse, the white parents asked the school board for their children to be transferred to Brooks Junior High.⁹ Unlike any time before, the white families' long-standing beliefs were being threatened. And as more African Americans entered the once predominant white neighborhoods, white residents found new ways to regain their segregated schools.

This was accomplished by redrawing the school district lines. In 1958 the Wichita school district redrew its lines based on where the black neighborhoods were, as you can see on page 7. Since the majority of African Americans lived on the east side of Hillside Avenue, the new district boundary ran parallel with Hillside. With this new district boundary, Wichita once again regained its segregated schools. Throughout the late fifties and the entire decade of the 1960s, the public schools of Wichita were not challenged to change their ways. To ensure that this wouldn't happen, the United States Congress established the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1957. "This directed to the investigation of studying and collecting information concerning legal developments constituting a denial of equal protection of the laws under the constitution because

⁸ Kitchen, Paul. "Segregation in Wichita." See www.slideshare.net/kansaskitchen/0131-segregation-in-wichita. Last accessed 13 May, 2014.

⁹ Kitchen, Paul. "Segregation in Wichita."

of race, color, religion, sex, or nation origin.”¹⁰ Sadly, this did not influence the Wichita community until 1970.

In 1966, Chester Lewis, President of the NAACP Wichita chapter, filed a complaint with the U.S. Office of Education claiming the Wichita school system still remaining segregated. His supporting evidence included: “...six elementary schools with a student body of 90+% black and one junior high (Mathewson) that was 90+% black, 130 black teachers, 113 assigned to black schools, all black principals were assigned to black schools, and more than 2/3 of ninety-three portables were located at black elementary schools.”¹¹ Due to this eye-opening evidence, the Office of Civil Rights came to Wichita in 1967 and 1968. After their investigation, they made up a series of plans that would desegregate the schools. One of these plans was to hire a new superintendent, “Dr. Alvin E. Morris, they believed, would make significant steps forward in the course towards desegregation.”¹² However, after meeting with the Office of Civil Rights the following year, they were not impressed with the changes and decided to take full action. The Office of Civil Rights developed the “1969 Plan” which basically stated, if desegregation continued that Wichita would be suspended from federal funding. Due to the uncooperative behavior from the Wichita school board, “the U.S. Government was able to withhold 5.3 million in federal aid from Wichita until the school board decided to desegregate the school.”¹³ After the U.S. Government threatened Wichita with financial sanctions, the mission of desegregation was put into full force. The school board made new assigned attendance areas so the black students who were once restricted by the district boundary lines could now attend schools in their

¹⁰ “School Desegregation in Wichita Kansas.” A Staff Report of the United States Commission of Civil Rights (1977): 1-32.

¹¹ Kitchen, Paul. “Segregation in Wichita.”

¹² “School Desegregation in Wichita Kansas.” A Staff Report of the United States Commission of Civil Rights (1977): 1-32.

¹³ Kitchen, Paul. “Segregation in Wichita.”

neighborhood. The school board also eliminated the portable class rooms that were mainly used by African Americans. Along with the students, “the faculty staff was to be desegregated by 1970.”¹⁴ With these actions, the Wichita schools were fully desegregated by the 1971-1972 school year.

The journey to fully desegregating the Wichita public schools was long and difficult. Throughout the twentieth century the black population constantly faced restricting laws and practices in their daily life. Although our country made significant steps towards equality by creating and administering new laws, many cities like Wichita took decades to enforce them. As a result of actions such as those of Chester Lewis, who exposed the mistreatment that had been overlooked for nearly 20 years in Wichita, change began to occur. His exposure of segregated educational practices brought legal equality to the African American community; he also showed how ineffective the desegregation laws were when the enforcing officials were members of the dominant race. What I’m stating is that without help from the U.S. government and the threatening of school funds, a dominantly white school board that strategically made sure schools would remain segregated would have kept in place this system. When we think about the laws passed for equality in the 1950s, we must also process how much time it took for these laws to take full effect.

¹⁴ “School Desegregation in Wichita Kansas.” A Staff Report of the United States Commission of Civil Rights (1977): 1-32.

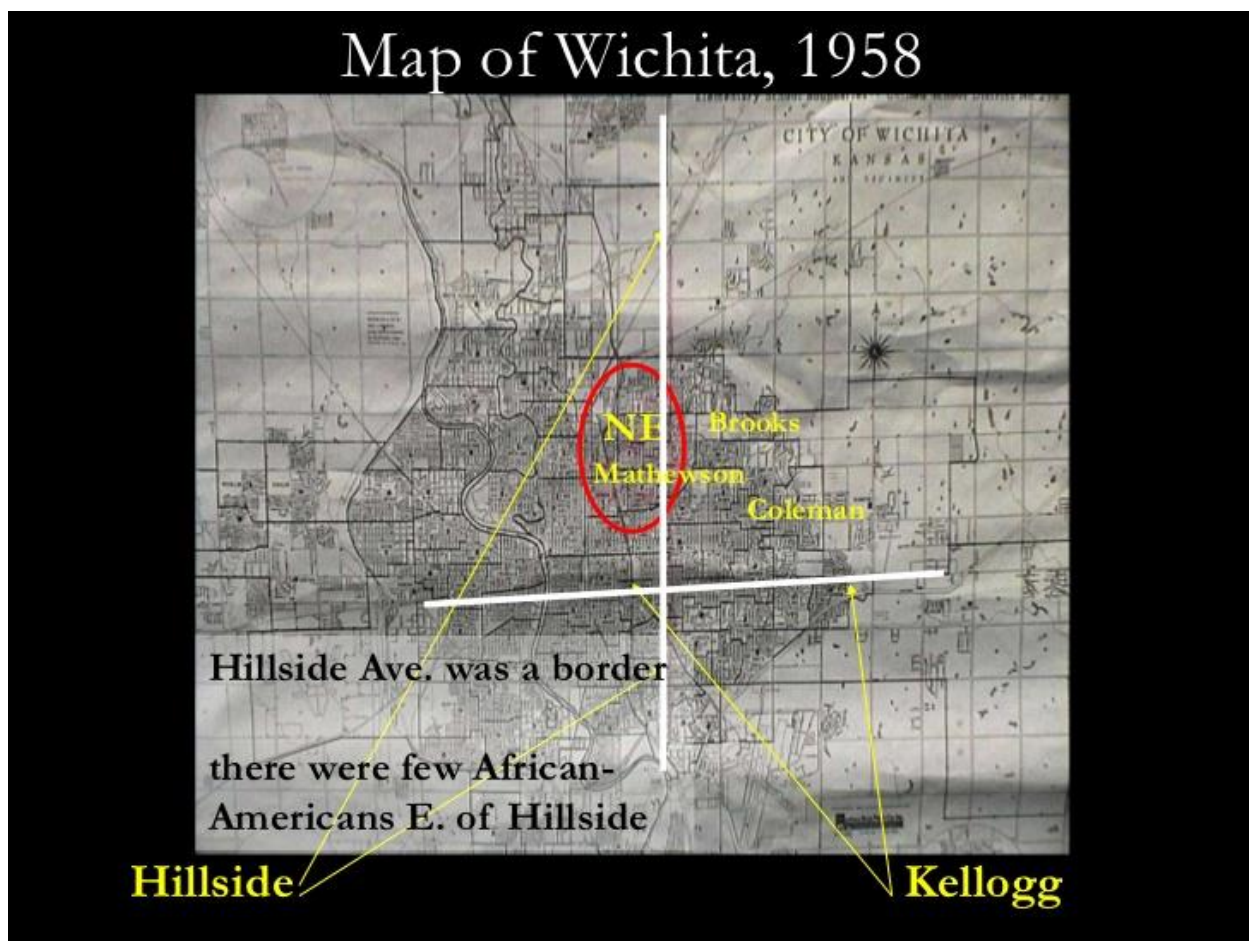


Figure 1. Wichita district boundary lines 1958. Wichita Township, Wichita, Kansas. See www.slideshare.net/kansaskitchen/0131-segregation-in-wichita. Last accessed 13 May, 2013.

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Wichita City Map, 1958. See www.slideshare.net/kansaskitchen/0131-segregation-in-wichita. Last accessed 13 May, 2013.