

AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORIC SITES OF INDEPENDENCE

Since the early nineteenth century, African Americans have played a vital role in the history and development of Jackson County and Independence. On December 15, 1826, Jackson County was organized and on July 2, 1827, the first county court was held in Independence. By 1830, Independence was poised to play an important role in the settlement of the west. The Santa Fe Trail trade was already established and by the 1840s and 1850s the city served as a prominent place that outfitted settlers who prepared to travel into the west over the Oregon and California trails. In the 1840s and 1850s the city's population became increasingly diverse and attracted more and more people, including large slaveholders, like Jabez Smith, and free blacks, including Emily Fisher and Hiram Young. They all were drawn to Independence and participated in the provisioning and outfitting of those who traveled to and settled in the West.

As the trails traffic of the early to mid-nineteenth century gave way to the rails traffic in the 1870s, African Americans remained a visible and important part of Independence's history and, in the post Civil War era, they established civic organizations, built several churches, and advocated for the establishment of public schools for African American students. Hiram Revels, who went on to become the first African American to serve in the US Senate from Mississippi, spent some time in Independence organizing the African Methodist Episcopal church. Hiram Young donated money to construct a school for African American students.

Following the turn of the twentieth century, a vibrant African American community was active in the city. During this time, Melvin Tolson, who went on to become a noted African American poet, called Independence home. It was also at this time that a politician, Harry Truman, began serving on the county court and a young African American woman, Vietta Garr, began working at the Wallace/Truman home.

As the 1920s turned into the depression of the 1930s, many poor blacks and whites, who had already settled into an area of the city called the Neck, struggled to make it. The Neck was located just north of the Independence Square and south of U. S. 24 Highway. By the 1950s, community leaders became concerned about this area and believed that it needed to be redeveloped. The proposed redevelopment project recommended the total clearance of all the homes in the area. During the 1960s, African American residents of the area voiced strong opposition to the project, which brought the civil rights movement to Independence.

Today, African American residents of Independence continue to contribute to their city's history by remembering their past and honoring those who came before.

1. FORMER JACKSON COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Independence Square
(Intersection of Main Street and Maple Avenue)

Although it has been renovated and expanded numerous times since its construction, this courthouse building retains portions of the third Jackson County Courthouse. Following the completion of the original log courthouse, a permanent brick courthouse building was finished in 1831, using the labor of slaves and slave-made bricks. In 1836, this building was replaced by another new brick courthouse, which was again constructed with the help of slave labor. Despite changes to the courthouse building, remnants of this 1836 structure are still incorporated into the current courthouse. Until the Civil War, the courthouse was also significant as the location for the sale of slaves, which took place on the steps of the building.

2. LOG COURTHOUSE

107 West Kansas Avenue
When Jackson County was established in December of 1826, the court decided to build a



1838 Independence Square Courthouse

temporary log courthouse. They selected Sam Shepard, a slave owned by James Shepard who was known for his expert craftsmanship in cutting and shaping the logs, to construct the log courthouse. The original log courthouse was erected at the intersection of Lynn and Lexington. It served as the courthouse for only four years, later becoming a private residence, and was eventually moved to its present location in 1916. Sam Shepard later escaped to freedom in Kansas and moved to Lawrence where he lived to be over 100 years old.

3. WAGGONER-GATES MILL/ NATIONAL FRONTIER TRAILS MUSEUM*

318 West Pacific Avenue
After the Civil War, William Waggoner opened the Waggoner Milling operation, which became the largest business in Independence and it continued to operate into the 1960s. Waggoner hired blacks to work in the mill, as part of an integrated workforce, which was uncommon during the late 1800s. He also built on to an existing nearby home in the 1890s and only hired black people to work in his large

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This brochure highlights the contributions of African Americans to the history of Independence.

This tour begins at the former Jackson County Courthouse, at the center of the Independence Square. It leads you by sites that had ties to the history of Independence's African-American community and ends at the Harry S. Truman Home National Historic Site. The suggested route brings you past each site as they are numbered in this brochure, but does not necessarily follow chronological order. If you choose to visit the sites using a different route, please be aware of one way streets and turning restrictions.

Sites marked with a * are open to the public and can be toured, although some have a fee to do so. If you wish to tour the Truman Home, you will need to stop at the National Park Service Visitor's Center, which is located at 223 North Main Street, just north of Point of Interest #18 (The Marshal's Home and Jail), to buy your tickets.



For additional information about historic sites and additional tourism information contact the **Independence Tourism Department**
800-748-7323 • www.visitindependence.com

home. Today the National Frontier Trails center is located where the old mill once stood and the Trails Center exhibits a Hiram Young document and one of Young's ox yokes, which was manufactured in his factory on North Liberty Street.

4. WOODLAWN CEMETERY*

701 South Noland Road
Woodlawn Cemetery is the official city cemetery of Independence and is owned and maintained by the city. Land for the cemetery was purchased in 1837, with additional acreage added in 1845, creating what was formerly known as City Cemetery. Directly south of the City Cemetery was the six-acre St. Mary Catholic Cemetery. In 1922, these cemeteries were combined and renamed Woodlawn Cemetery; additional land acquisitions have increased to property to 56 acres. Among the notable African-Americans buried in Woodlawn Cemetery are James Boldridge, Emily Fisher, Vietta Garr, and Hiram Young, and their graves have been marked with notable monuments. However, a large number of other African-Americans who played important roles in the early history of Independence are also buried here.

5. HIRAM YOUNG SCHOOL (SECOND LOCATION)

501 North Dodgion Street
In 1935, the Independence School District completed work on a new building for the city's African American students. The African American teachers were pleased to move to a new school building; however, one teacher, Tamar Randall, sat down and openly cried after she learned that the new school building was completely unfurnished, because she knew her students would not receive the same education as the white students in town.

During this period, the school district also started a high school for black students, but in 1945 the high school was abandoned because the parents of several students believed that the high school instruction was inferior to the instruction that the

white high school students received at William Chrisman High School. As a result, African American high school students from Independence attended Lincoln High School in Kansas City. These students continued to attend Lincoln High School until 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court declared separate but equal (segregated schools) unconstitutional in the Brown v. Board of Education decision. In the fall of 1954, William Chrisman was integrated and the lower grades were integrated in the following years. Following desegregation, the Young School building continued to be used by the Independence Board of Education for special education classes, until the 1980s.

6. JABEZ SMITH HOME AND FARM

Northeast corner of North Noland Road and U.S. 24 Highway
(Current site of William Chrisman High School.)
Jabez Smith was born in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, on March 2, 1787. He operated a store in Virginia and also became involved in land speculation prior to coming to Jackson County in 1843, when he purchased several tracts of land from previous settlers, as well as some land held by the federal government. In 1844, he moved to Jackson County and brought with him between 340 and 400 slaves, which made Smith one of the largest slaveholders in the state. The number of slaves that Smith brought to Jackson County was out of the ordinary, because most Missourians who owned slaves during this time only owned between one to five slaves. While the large number of slaves implies that Smith was engaged in plantation agriculture, his probate records do not reveal the agricultural work of his slaves; however, they do reveal that Smith was also engaged in freighting goods into the west with Jacob Hall and Isaac Hockaday and he had an established business relationship with free black, Hiram Young. There is also evidence to suggest that Smith

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Funeral of James Boldridge at St. Paul AME Church in 1918

was hiring out his slaves to work on freighting expeditions that went into the west.

Smith's first wife, Susan, died before he came to Missouri; however, the couple's sons, Henry C. Smith, Thomas T. Smith, and John T. Smith made the journey with their father. Henry C. Smith died in 1849 in a cholera outbreak, which supposedly also claimed the lives of at least 100 to 200 of the slaves that had come with the Virginia entourage. Jabez Smith married Ann Eliza Kean on May 25, 1851, and the couple had one son, Jabez Smith, Jr. In 1852, Jabez, Sr. constructed Ann a fifteen room home, on the site of present day William Chrisman High School. Jabez Smith, Sr. died in 1855, leaving his estate to his wife and his remaining sons. At the time of his death he owned 311 slaves. After the Civil War, many of Smith's former slaves remained in the area, including members of the Hartwell Tucker family.

7. HIRAM YOUNG HOME & WAGON AND OX YOKE FACTORY SITES

Southeast corner of North Liberty Street and U.S. 24 Highway
Hiram Young was born in Tennessee in 1812 and he later came to Missouri as a slave. According to historian William Patrick O'Brien, Young "purchased his freedom from George Young of Greene County, Missouri, in 1847." Prior to earning his own freedom, Hiram Young also purchased

the freedom of his wife, Matilda, by saving up the money he made selling ox yokes. He had purchased her freedom first because, under the laws of the state of Missouri, the free or enslaved status of a baby was determined by the status of the child's mother. If the mother was a slave the child would be a slave as well, and Young wanted to make sure that any children born to the couple would not be enslaved. When Hiram Young gained his freedom, in 1847, he and Matilda were living in Liberty and three years later the couple moved to Independence.

When Hiram and Matilda Young arrived in Independence in 1850, the town was a bustling place and it served as an important outfitting stop for settlers and government contractors who traveled into the west and for traders engaged in the Mexican trade. Railroads had not been completed across the state so settlers had to travel over land. Also, the federal government created a series of forts in the west to protect the expanding white settlement and these forts needed supplies. The Mexican trade and westward expansion made the location of Independence, as a provisioning center for the trails, an important place where Young's craftsmanship as a maker of ox yoke and wagons could be utilized. By 1851, Young was involved with the "manufactory of yokes and wagons—principally freight wagons for hauling govt [sic] freight across the plains." Young's



Ex-Slave Association at Log Courthouse

partner was another free black, Dan Smith, and they remained partners until 1855. William McCoy, the city's first mayor, served as Young's business manager.

In 1860, "Hiram Young and Company" was one of the largest wagon factories in Jackson County. He made between eight and nine hundred wagons a year and employed about twenty men. Some of those employees were slaves and Young allowed them to purchase their freedom and become free blacks, like himself. At least seven forges operated on the factory site. The 1860 census noted that Young had already completed 300 wagons and 6,000 yokes. Each ox yoke was made to pull six thousand pounds and this equipment was critical to the Mexican trade and to westward expansion.

Young left Independence in 1861 when the Civil War broke out and he temporarily located his business in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He returned after the war; however, his wagon factory sustained significant damage during the war and he sued the federal government to recover \$22,100. Unfortunately, the coming of the railroads displaced the need for Young's ox yokes and wagons and he died in 1883, leaving significant business debt behind. In 1907 the federal government dismissed the suit he had brought for damages to his wagon factory. Matilda Young passed away in 1896, leaving the couple's one surviving daughter, Amanda. Amanda attended Oberlin College in 1871; after graduating, she came back to Independence and served as the principal at the school that bore her father's name. Amanda Young died in 1913 and, like her parents, was buried in Independence's Woodlawn Cemetery.

8. THE NECK NEIGHBORHOOD SITE* Now McCoy Park

The Neck (the origin of the area's name is somewhat obscure) was the largest African American neighborhood that developed in Independence after the Civil War. However, during the 1960s, working class whites could also be found living in the Neck, which meant that blacks and whites were living side by side in an integrated neighborhood. By the 1960s, many Independence leaders believed that the Neck was an eyesore; they considered the condition of some of the homes substandard and the absence of a modern sewage system problematic. Its location was right between the newly constructed Harry S. Truman Library and Museum and the Independence Square, making it a prominent sight for visitors. In 1962, the city established the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority (LCRA) to redevelop this area. The LCRA carried out its urban renewal program in two large projects. The first, known as the Northwest Parkway Project, targeted the "improvement" of a residential area immediately south of the Truman Library and U. S. 24 Highway, and a large part of this area included the Neck. The second project included redevelopment initiatives carried out on the Independence Square.

African American residents were staunch critics of Independence's Urban Renewal program and they expressed their opposition to the LCRA board that oversaw the project. In December 1963, the LCRA board held a meeting with the members of the Negro for Progress in Independence Committee, which was composed of at least four members—two pastors from Independence's African American churches, along with Earl Moreland and Virginia Jacobs. Committee members asked the LCRA board whether African Americans affected by the project would receive just compensation for their homes. The LCRA assured the committee that they would be treated fairly and would receive fair prices for their homes. However, negotiating the purchase price for the properties was one of the easiest tasks for the LCRA board. What remained difficult was the board's task to find suitable replacement dwellings for the displaced African Americans, since African Americans could not easily find housing during this time because of the extensive practice of segregated housing in the metro area.

Despite these protests, by 1969 the LCRA board had removed all of the residents from the Neck and

constructed McCoy Park and Bess Truman Parkway, which connected the Truman Library to the Independence Square. Since the destruction of the Neck neighborhood, over the years, residents of the area have held reunions to remember the time they spent in the neighborhood.

9. WHITE OAK STREET METHODIST EPISCOPAL PARSONAGE SITE

140 West White Oak
From 1914 to 1918, Melvin Tolson lived at this location and attended Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri. Melvin was born on February 6, 1898, in Moberly, Missouri, to Alonzo and Lera Tolson. Alonzo Tolson was an itinerant minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church and served as the pastor of White Oak Methodist Episcopal Church during the late 1910s. Spending his high school years in Independence influenced the future work that Melvin Tolson would embark on, both as a noted professor and poet.

In 1924, Tolson graduated from Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania and Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, offered him a position teaching English and speech. As a teacher at Wiley, Tolson organized a debate team and a theater company, which came to known as the Log Cabin Players. In 1930, his debate team faced off against a team from the University of Michigan Law School and defeated them, which was the first time that a black debate team had defeated a white debate team. In 1935, Tolson's debate team, which included James Farmer, who would go on to be a noted civil rights leader in the 1960s, defeated the University of Southern California debate team, which was that year's national debate champion. The Great Debaters, a movie in which Denzel Washington played the role of Tolson, recounted the adventures of that 1935 debate team. In 1953 Tolson published "Libretto for the Republic of Liberia," which critics compared to the work of T. S. Eliot. He died in August of 1966 in Dallas, Texas, and was laid to rest in Guthrie, Oklahoma.

10. VIETTA GARR HOME 131 East Farmer Street

lone Vietta Garr was born in March 1896, to Benjamin and Emma Garr. Benjamin was born in 1858 into slavery, on a farm that was located near Independence. After the Civil War, the family farmed around Independence and became active in the Baptist church. Some evidence suggests that Benjamin became a houseman for George Porterfield Gates, who was Bess Truman's grandfather, and he also took care of horses or mules and served as a laborer at a local rock quarry. Vietta's mother, Emma, worked as a laundress.

Vietta attended the Young School and completed her education there; in 1920, she was working as a domestic servant in an Independence home. In 1928, Madge Gates Wallace hired her to work at 219 North Delaware. When Vietta arrived, Harry and Bess Truman were also living at 219 North Delaware. Vietta Garr served the Wallace-Truman households until 1943, when she left her position to manage the Crown Drug Store lunch counter in Kansas City, Missouri. She returned to work for the family in 1945 and assisted in cooking meals for them. She also attended to Bess's mother, Madge Gates Wallace, and Bess's daughter, Margaret, when she embarked on a music tour.

When not working for the Trumans, Vietta was active in the Second Baptist Church. She often prepared food for church functions and played the piano and sang soprano in the church choir. She was also an active member in the Order of Twelve of the Knights and Daughters of Tabor. This organization, which was formed in 1872, had the objectives of spreading Christianity and education, as well as acquiring real estate and supporting temperance. In Independence, Vietta became a member of the women's Independence chapter, named Salem Tabernacle No. 1, in 1921. In 1927, Vietta was elected as the High Priestess of the society and remained in this position for several years; however, the Great Depression took its toll on members and Salem Tabernacle No. 1 disbanded in the 1930s because members could no longer afford to pay their dues.



James Boldridge

In 1953, Harry and Bess Truman returned to Independence after Harry's presidency ended and Vietta continued to work for the family. In 1973, while cooking in her home, Vietta accidentally caught her dress on fire. She suffered extensive burns and died on December 31, 1973. Her funeral was held at the Second Baptist Church on January 6, 1974 and she was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery next to her parents. In 2011, her home was added to the Harry S Truman Historic District, National Historic Landmark.

11. DOUGLASS SCHOOL / FIRST YOUNG SCHOOL SITE Northwest corner of Farmer Street and North Noland Road

In 1867, the Independence School Board hired two former slaves, Thomas Hale and William Tadlock, to teach the black children of Independence. The Second Baptist Church and the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church were utilized as classrooms for the new school. In 1874, Hiram Young raised \$4,000 to build a two-story, brick school for eight grades. The new school was called the Douglass School, in honor of Frederick Douglass, and it was located on the high ground between Farmer and Waldo Streets, with its rear elevation facing what is now Noland Road. For black students, the school district only allowed two grades for three months a year, while the white school, which also began in 1867, provided eight grades for a full school year. In 1882, after Hiram Young's death, the school was renamed the Young School and African American students continued to attend classes here until 1935, when a new school was constructed (See Point of Interest #5).

12. WHITE OAK STREET METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH SITE 144 East White Oak Street (northwest corner of North Noland Road)

White Oak Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in 1890, on the northwest corner of East White Oak Street and Noland Road. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the White Oak congregation allowed the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal church members to utilize this church for services, because St. Paul had razed its old church building and was constructing a new sanctuary. Later, the White Oak Methodist Episcopal Church merged with the First Methodist Church and the White Oak church building was razed by urban renewal.

13. SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH (CURRENT SANCTUARY) 116 East White Oak Street

Emily Fisher, a charter member of the church, donated the building materials for construction of this building, which occurred in 1888. Over the years the church served as a focal point for African American political, social, and religious life.

Emily Fisher was born into slavery, around 1808. Her owner was Adam Fisher and he was also likely her father. Emily and her family, including her husband and three children, were slaves on the Fisher



1941
1861 — 1987
Second Baptist Church with charter members Simon Johnson and Emily Fisher

laborer and the couple was renting a house. By 1908, the Boldridge family had moved to Independence and owned a house at 212 East Maple Avenue, approximately where the Independence Central Police Building is now located. His occupation is listed in the Kansas City Directory as "horse trainer." For the next ten years, Boldridge and his family continued to live on East Maple Avenue where he trained and bred horses. By 1916, the family's single family, frame house had a large, frame breeding barn located at the rear of the lot. Boldridge died in 1918 of acute tuberculosis, leaving his wife and four children. On the day of his funeral, all of the businesses on the Independence Square closed out of respect. He was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery with a simple, unengraved concrete marker; in 2010, the Community of Concerned Citizens erected a monument at his grave site.

15. ST. PAUL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL (AME) CHURCH (CURRENT LOCATION) 200 East Lexington Avenue

In 1865, Hiram Young attended the Missouri Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and asked that an AME church be established in Independence. The church sent noted organizer Hiram Revels to the city. Potential congregants held meetings in their homes and the church was officially organized on April 17, 1866, at the home of Benjamin and Amanda Smith, son of Hartwell and Betsy Tucker. Revels briefly served the congregation as its minister.

Revels returned to Mississippi, where he was elected to the Mississippi State Senate in 1869, during Reconstruction. His colleagues in the Mississippi State Legislature elected him to finish out the term of one of the state's two Senators. Revels arrived in Washington D.C. and was

seated on February 25, 1870 in the Senate chamber, becoming the first African American to serve in the United States Congress.

The St. Paul's AME congregation built its first sanctuary, a small frame structure, just west of Noland Road on the north side of East White Oak Street. In 1877, the church moved from the White Oak location to its present site on the east side of Memorial Drive (then Noland Road), between Maple and Lexington Avenues, where they constructed a brick church. A church parsonage was also built, on the northeast corner of Memorial Drive and East Lexington Avenue, directly south of the church building. In the 1950s, both the 1877 brick church and the parsonage were demolished and a new sanctuary was constructed on the parsonage site. A new parsonage was built at 1222 North Lynn Street.

16. TRUMAN HOME 219 North Delaware

Harry Truman became president in 1945 when Franklin Roosevelt died. Truman's immediate concern was bringing an end to World War II; however, he did address civil rights during his presidency. On December 5, 1946, Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9808, which created the President's Committee on Civil Rights, and he instructed this committee to examine America's record on civil rights. The committee released its report titled, To Secure These Rights, on October 29, 1947. The report did not sugar coat several areas where the United States had failed to protect the civil rights of its citizens, particularly the rights of African Americans. In 1948, during the run up to the November presidential election, Harry Truman created another committee by Executive Order 9981, which ultimately oversaw the integration of the nation's armed forces. The integrated military fought for the first time in the Korean War.

