

From Brown to Brown: Topeka's Civil Rights Story

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Brown v. Board of Education
National Historic Site
Kansas



"God sees it. I have only a short time to live—only one death to die, and I will die fighting for this cause. There will be no more peace in this land until slavery is done for. I will give them something else to do than to extend slave territory...."

- John Brown
August 30, 1856



Lincoln School, Topeka, KS in 1959 Kansas State Historical Society Photo

A Long Struggle for Freedom and Equality

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

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

Tragic Prelude by John Steuart Curry Kansas State Historical Society Photo



Elisha Scott, a Washburn University School of Law graduate, became one of Topeka's leading civil rights attorneys.

University of Kansas photo



Kansas – A Free or Slave State?

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



Constitution Hall Constitution Hall Photo



Kansas Statehouse NPS Photo

One City, Many Languages

The trickle of African Americans into the city in the years after the Civil War turned into a flood. Southern blacks fled the poverty and violence of the former slave states seeking a better life in Kansas. Eastern European Jews and Catholics also fled their homelands and made their way to Kansas. They often stepped off the train carrying only a few personal belongings and a badge with their name. Escaping the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution and lured by the prospect of jobs with the Santa Fe Railroad locomotive shops, Hispanics arrived in ever greater numbers. The Topeka Cemetery reflects this diversity. The gravesite of Sam Scrinopskie, who arrived alone in Topeka in 1889 and began his new life as a street peddler, can be seen alongside those of Topeka's founders, including Cyrus K. Holliday, and Kansas governors, such as Arthur Capper.



The Historic Ritchie House Kansas State Historical Society Photo



Santa Fe Shops and Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church Kansas State Historical Society Photo

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



Civil War Monument at Topeka Cemetery NPS Photo

Mapping Topeka History



Federal Building/Post Office

NPS Photo



Buchanan Elementary School

NPS Photo



Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site

NPS Photo



Sumner Elementary School

Kansas State Historical Society Photo

Equality in Education

Perhaps nowhere in Topeka was the color line more entrenched and bitterly fought over than in the public schools. In 1880, segregation was challenged when two young girls were denied admission to the all white Clay Street School and sent instead to the then all black Sumner School. Altogether, Topeka's African American community initiated six legal actions to integrate Topeka's schools. Their only success came in 1941 when a Topeka court integrated the city's junior high schools. As Topeka's African American parents took their fight into the courtroom, the Hispanic community also united to end the segregation of their children through the fourth grade in the Branner

School Annex. Protesting that the separation of their children was "un-American," the parents won their case. The Topeka Board of Education closed the Branner School Annex in August of 1942.

The state law allowing Topeka to maintain a dual school system in the elementary grades remained on the books. So long as the schools remained "separate but equal," the city complied with the law of the land. By the late 1940s Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), decided to attack segregation in the nation's public

schools. He encouraged the Topeka branch of the NAACP to initiate a case. In 1951, local lawyers recruited thirteen African American families whose children attended Monroe Elementary and other all black schools. In a third floor courtroom in Topeka's Old Federal Building, those attorneys and members of Marshall's NAACP staff rose to argue a lawsuit that would become known as *Brown v. Board of Education*. Joined by four other lawsuits from across the nation, the case brought an end to racial segregation in America's schools with the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1954.

Locations Contact Information:

- Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site #010**
1515 SE Monroe Street (785) 354-4273
www.nps.gov/brvb
The only national park named after a U.S. Supreme Court case, and located in the former all black Monroe School.
- Mamie Williams House #020**
1503 SE Quincy Street
Built in the 1920s by her father, this home served as the lifelong residence of Topeka teacher Mamie Williams.
- The Historic Ritchie House #030**
1116 SE Madison Street (785) 234-6097
www.shawneecountyhistory.org
The John and Hale Ritchie homes tell the story of Topeka from its founding to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision through the eyes of those who lived it.
- Buchanan Elementary School #040**
1195 SW Buchanan Street
An all black elementary school built in 1885, Buchanan served the children of Topeka's historic Tennessee Town neighborhood.
- Charles Curtis House Museum #160**
1101 SW Topeka Boulevard (785) 357-1371
www.charlescurtisismuseum.com
Charles Curtis served as a U.S. Congressman, U.S. Senator, and in 1929 became the first Native American to hold the office of Vice President of the United States.
- Kansas Statehouse #050**
915 SW Jackson Street (785) 296-3966
www.kansastravel.org/kansasstatecapitol.htm
Constructed between 1866 and 1903, the State Capitol is the home of the famous John Steuart Curry painting, *Tragic Prelude*, featuring John Brown.
- First Washburn University School of Law #060**
118 SW 8th Avenue
Today housing a popular Topeka eatery, the third floor of the building was the home of the Washburn Law School from 1903 to 1911.
- Constitution Hall #070**
429 S Kansas Avenue
www.KansasConstitutionHall.org
In 1855, Free-State delegates assembled in Constitution Hall and drafted the Topeka Constitution declaring, "There shall be no slavery in this State."
- Old Federal Building/U.S. Post Office #080**
424 S Kansas Avenue, #1 (800) 275-8771
Dedicated in 1934, the *Brown v. Board of Education* case was argued in the third floor courtroom.
- Topeka Cemetery #090**
1601 SE 10th Avenue, #1 (785) 233-4132
www.topeka.org
Established in 1859, the cemetery is the resting place for Kansas governors and others, including black Civil War veterans.
- Sumner Elementary School #100**
330 SW Western Avenue
www.skyways.lib.ks.us/orgs/schs/preservation/html
One of 18 elementary schools established for Topeka's white children during the time of the *Brown* decision.
- St. Mark AME Church #110**
801 NW Harrison Street
Oliver Brown, lead plaintiff in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, pastored St. Mark from 1953 to 1959 and was in the church when he received word they had won the case.



- Great Overland Station #120**
701 N Kansas Avenue (785) 232-5533
www.greatoverlandstation.com
The station, which opened in 1927 as part of the Union Pacific line, has been restored and today houses exhibits.
- Our Lady of Guadeloupe Catholic Church #130**
134 NE Lake Street (785) 232-5088
www.olg-parish.org
Built in the heart of Topeka's Hispanic community, the Church's Marlo Cuevas-Balandran Activity Center displays a mural painted by noted local artist Andy Valdivia depicting the Parish's history.
- The Great Mural Wall of Topeka #140**
2001 SW Western Avenue
Topeka students, working with artists, turned a building formerly housing a water reservoir into a canvas celebrating Topeka's history.
- Kansas Museum of History & Kansas State Historical Society #150**
6425 SW 6th Avenue (785) 272-8681
www.kshs.org
The museum features exhibits, artworks, and artifacts telling the story of the state from prehistoric times to the present.

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For More Information:

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Topeka, Kansas 66603
(785) 234-1030
www.visittopeka.us or www.topeka365.com

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120 SE 6th Avenue, Suite 110
Topeka, KS 66603-3515
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www.topekachamber.org

Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area
P.O. Box 526
Lawrence, KS 66044
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www.freedomsfrontier.org

