

# African-American History Walking Tour

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**Length:** *About 1 mile*

**Start:** *You may wish to park on or near the Liberty Square, as the tour will end here. To start, walk four blocks north on Main Street (where the street ends) to the Garrison School.*

## Introduction

African Americans first came to Liberty in 1817 with Southern slave owners from Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina and Virginia; these slaves and their descendants became the pioneers who founded the black community that has been an integral part of Clay County for over 175 years: Estes, Beauchamp, Withers, Capps, Bird, Thompson, Houston, Dorsey, Boggess, Samuel and Allen.

The decade before the Civil War was a time of great unrest in western Missouri. Clay County experienced this turmoil over the issues of slavery and free soil states. In 1850, the population of Clay County was 9,426, *of which approximately 27% were slaves*. Liberty's African-American population at this time comprised just over 20% of the total population of 827. There were only 14 free Blacks in the entire county. However, in 1863 President Abraham Lincoln, who did not receive a single Clay County vote when he ran for president, issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all slaves.

Two years later and eleven months before the ratification of the thirteenth amendment that abolished slavery in the United States, the Missouri legislature passed the slave emancipation act, known as Manumission Day, ending slavery across the state on January 11, 1865. Black men in Clay County received the right to vote on January 1, 1870, a short lived constitutional right

that ended during the Reconstruction era in 1877. African Americans in the United States could not vote again until the Civil Rights laws were passed in 1965.

When Confederate soldiers returned home from the Civil War, they brought prejudices against blacks with them. So deep were passions from the War in Clay County that it was not until 1912 that the United States flag was hoisted above the Clay County Courthouse for the first time in more than 50 years. In spite of Jim Crow laws of segregation and Klan activity, the black community remained an active part of the city.

Before integration and the passing of civil rights laws, living in segregated communities forced blacks to provide small, home-owned "mom and pop" restaurants, entertainment, and community services for the black community. This tour presents just a small sample of the Clay County heritage enriched by its African-American residents who lived mainly on streets in the old North end of town: Gallatin, Prairie and Grover, and in the south end of town on South Main Street.

**Garrison School.** Prior to 1865 it was against the law to teach a slave to read or write. When the Civil War ended, African Americans in Liberty first attended a private school for black and Indian children in the home of Mrs. Laura Armstrong, a liberal white woman, located on West Mill Street, and later in a series of other homes in Liberty. African-American residents established Garrison School in 1877. The first Garrison School building stood until 1910. The current building was built in 1911.

Garrison School, however, only provided its students with a 10th grade education, and

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the "separate but equal" laws barred them from attending Liberty's white high school. Therefore, many Garrison graduates had to ride buses into Kansas City to attend the all black Lincoln High School. Finally, on May 17, 1954, as a result of arguments in the Supreme Court case *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education*, the court ruled "separate but equal education" unconstitutional, and the Liberty School District began to integrate its African American students.

Inside the Garrison School are archives of the Clay County African-American Legacy, Inc, committed to educating and informing the community of the accomplishments of African Americans of Clay County, and how they have influenced and contributed to the rich history of the Northland.

*Retrace your steps south on Main Street.*

**St. Luke AME Church, 443 N. Main**  
Rev. Jesse Mills organized St. Luke African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in 1875. The present structure was built in 1935 and completed and dedicated in 1942. Dr. John Priest Green, former president of William Jewell College, donated the stone used for the building from his land nearby, and male members of St. Luke quarried stone, and transported the loads by wheelbarrow to the church site where women mixed mortar and the stones were placed according to Rev. A. G. Thurman's plans. St. Luke is a Clay County Historical Landmark. In the history of this church, there have been three fires, one caused by lightning, and major damage from the 2003 tornado.

*Walk west through the alley opposite the church that leads to Gallatin Street. Turn left (south) to the James A. Gay Home.*

**James A. Gay Home, 415 N. Gallatin Street**  
This Colonial Revival Bungalow was the home of Professor James A. Gay, a graduate of Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. For twenty-two years he was the principal of Garrison School, and the man responsible for naming the school after the great abolitionist and journalist, William Lloyd Garrison. Professor Gay taught Religion, Latin and Greek at Western Bible Baptist College in Macon, Missouri, (before the college moved to Kansas City). His close friend at William Jewell College, Professor Dr. H. I. Hester, referred Jewell students to Professor Gay for tutoring in Latin and Greek.

*Continue walking south to First Baptist Church.*

**First Baptist/Mt. Zion Church, 336 N. Gallatin** As in most communities, churches served as the most important institutions for their members. Not surprisingly, in 1843 slaves were among the first citizens in Liberty to organize a Baptist church under the leadership of Rev. William Brown, a young man less than twenty years of age.

Before the Liberty congregation built a sanctuary, slaves, masters, and free blacks worshipped in the northeast corner of the courthouse, often sharing the communion cup. Later the church moved to an old barn on Missouri Street where they worshipped until the group purchased a lot and built First Baptist/Mt. Zion on Gallatin Street.

*Continue to walk west through the alley to Prairie Street.*

**The Lucy Colley Home, 403 North Prairie**  
This 1890 Gothic Revival house (note the center gable) was the home of Mrs. Lucy Colley, affectionately called Miss Lucy by community residents. She was a graduate of Garrison School, and the Church Musician

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and pianist at St. Luke A.M.E. for more than five decades. On her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, she played church hymns on the piano while her friends and family celebrated the occasion at Ashton Court Care Center in Liberty. She died at the age of 100 in January 2007.

Her personal piano, an ornately carved *Aaron of New York* walnut wood antique is now on display at Garrison School.

*Retrace your steps back to Gallatin and then south to 310 N. Gallatin*

### **Sam Houston Home, 310 N. Gallatin**

This 1903 Folk Victorian House was owned by Sam Houston, one of Liberty's most outstanding citizens. His grandparents helped build First Baptist Church established in 1843. Sam served on the City Council for 18 years and was the first African-American to be so elected. During his tenure, he initiated the first Juneteenth celebration and the first Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday Celebration north of the River, starting in 1984. He has received numerous civic awards, and in 1980 Former Missouri Governor Teasdale appointed him to the Commission on Human Rights.

*Continue south on Gallatin about 3 blocks to Franklin Street. Then walk east (left) up the hill to the Clay County Administration Building (the old Court House). If the Building is open, take steps or elevator to the third floor.*

**African-American Mural, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor Old Courthouse.** On the long wall at the top of the stairs you will find the African American Legacy Mural to your left. This mural depicts selected early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century African-American pioneers, businesses, churches, and schools, including White Oak Chapel (the restored Chapel has been relocated to the grounds of Stroud's on I-35)

and Cemetery from the Fountain Waller Plantation (1836) located on Shady Lane Street, in the Carriage Hills subdivision of Gladstone; Dr. D.A. Ellett's Sulpho Saline Bath House and Swimming Pool in Excelsior Springs (1880); First Baptist Church (1843); Peter Biggs, the first American owner of a barber shop in the Old West (1847); and the first African-American School in Missouri City (1877).

*Return to the north side (Franklin Street) of the Court House lawn.*

**The Freedom Fountain, NE corner of the old Courthouse lawn.** Erected in 2000 by the Clay County African-American Legacy Inc., this fountain honors African-Americans who have made contributions to the growth and development of Clay County. The Freedom Fountain is placed near the location where 150 years earlier slaves were regularly bought and sold. For example, in January 1859, \$20,000 worth of slaves was sold on this lawn in one day. The single water fountain for all people reminds Liberty of an earlier era when residents drank from segregated (white and colored) water fountains. The June 2000 dedication of this Freedom Fountain featured Governor Bob Holden, providing the first drink to Mrs. Lulu Johnson Felder, who at age 102 was the oldest living African-American resident of Clay County. She was born and raised in the first free black community in Clay County, (White Oak of North Kansas City), which was located in the same area as Stroud's Restaurant on I-35.

Take a moment to read the list on the back of the monument. How many names do you recognize because of this tour? Are there other names you recognize?

Enjoy your own drink of cool water from the Freedom Fountain.

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Conclude your tour by visiting any of the downtown restaurants for more refreshment. Here are possible discussion starters:

- How important is the American flag? Why is it important? What would make you refuse to fly it?
- How important is it to vote? How would you react if you were told that you could not vote?
- Why is a church so important for community residents? Are there any African American churches in your community? Why or Why not? Would it make a difference?
- If the place where you go for refreshments would serve you, but not serve someone else who enters because of race, creed, color, or national origin would you choose to patronize that restaurant? Why? Why not?
- How many African American pioneers can you associate with white Americans in the Liberty community? What is your explanation for these associations?

*Special thanks to Dr. Cecelia Robinson, professor of English, William Jewell College, and to the Clay County African-American Legacy, Inc for this tour.*

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